

JKR ended HBP dangling like a half-played chess match between the light side and the dark side. Both sides have taken some of their opponent's pieces, and each side had strong pieces left. Riddle had just taken an important piece with the death of Dumbledore and seemingly had the advantage. Harry had discovered important information regarding Voldemort with the discovery of the Horcruxes. This story tells my version about how the rest of that chess match might play out. The story is not so much about ships as sides, and the struggle of a young man to rebuild and lead a broken army. Various characters will be hurt or killed during the course of this story. If a grey story isn't for you, please consider reading Udderpd's wonderful stories instead.

Story

Wednesday 12 June, 1997 – 9AM - Granger residence

Emma Ganger was not having a good week. Three days earlier, she and her husband Dan had received notice that Headmaster Dumbledore had been murdered at the school where their daughter Hermione was attending. The previous summer Emma and Dan had begun expressing doubts regarding their daughter's safety within the wizarding world, and had been continually reassured that Hogwarts was the "safest place in the wizarding world," particularly with Professor Dumbledore at the school.

Emma and Dan were due to meet their daughter at 3PM at the Kings Cross station. They had agreed to hear her out before making any decisions. Emma and Dan owned and operated a successful dental surgery in Crawley, and were justifiably proud of it. While they both exhibited pride in ownership of their business, neither one of them were married to it. In fact, they had agreed to leave the country if necessary to keep their little family safe. They had no illusions that their daughter would give up being a witch – yes; they had become comfortable with the term. Yet they were aware that wizarding schools were located throughout the world, and they had confidence both in their own ability to relocate if needed as well as Hermione's to adapt, if necessary.

The news that they had been reading in the Daily Prophet seemed to center around two topics – the gradual darkening of the wizarding world and the prospect of hope that surrounded the speculation regarding one of Hermione's friends, Harry Potter.

They had subscribed to the Daily Prophet for the last year after Hermione had come home injured the previous summer. After several frustrating conversations, Hermione had finally admitted what had happened in the Department of Mysteries, and her parents were faced with the realities that her world had brought to them.

On one hand, they were delighted that their daughter had finally found a place in her world. Her school results indicated success, and she seemed to have found good friends at her school. On the other hand, they were deeply alarmed at the dangers that seemed to be teeming within her world.

They were fairly certain that Hermione would be highly upset if they tried to force her to transfer to another school. In reality, neither Dan nor Emma believed that they could force their strong minded, brilliant daughter to do anything that she wasn't inclined to do. At this point in her life, they felt that the person who might exert the most influence on her was Harry Potter. They hoped to invite him over for dinner this evening to get his viewpoint.

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While the two dentists were discussing their situation, Hermione and her friends Ron, and Harry were finding a carriage on the train. Harry was emotionally shattered over the events of the last week. He had been on the Astronomy tower with the professor and had watched helplessly as Dumbledore had first been threatened by Draco Malfoy, then murdered by Professor Snape, a man who Dumbledore had insisted on trusting despite six years of Harry's comments to the contrary. Harry had barely spoken with anyone since leaving Dumbledore's funeral. After breaking off a budding relationship with Ginny, Harry had become introspective and packed his trunk in silence before taking a walk around the grounds.

The fallout over Dumbledore's murder within the Wizarding world was widespread. Some within the Ministry of Magic speculated that the Board of School Governors would not reopen the school for the next term. Many of the students had serious doubts that their parents would even allow them to continue back at the castle for the fall term if the school were to reopen. Minister of Magic Rufus Scrimgeour had approached Harry immediately after the funeral. They hadn't really disagreed. Scrimgeour realized that Harry wasn't ready to talk and had kept the door open between them for future conversations.

It was a largely silent ride back on the train from the castle. Noticeably absent from the train were a handful of the sixth year students from Slytherin house. Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and Parkinson had been identified during the attack. Parkinson had been killed by Aurors, while Crabbe and Goyle had lacked the finesse to escape with Malfoy and Snape. They were arrested following the funeral. Many of the remaining Slytherin students felt that Malfoy and Snape had brought irreparable shame to the Slytherin house and somehow wanted to apologize to the other students. It was an apology that few people were prepared to listen to.

Harry sat silently looking out the window. His thoughts returned to the tower where he had watched as Dumbledore was murdered just feet away from him. Malfoy had stripped the badly weakened Dumbledore of his wand and a minute later Snape had taken his life. Harry wasn't sure how he had been immobilized while wearing his invisibility cloak, but he had never felt so helpless in his life.

As the train passed Sherwood Forest, he thought of Remus Lupin who lived nearby. Harry also thought of his parents and Sirius, desperately trying to draw strength from the few good memories that he had of them. For the first time in his life, Harry felt utterly alone. His father, his mother, Sirius and finally Dumbledore had all been taken away from him.

Harry's thoughts drifted back to the last few months and the Horcruxes or split soul pieces that Dumbledore had told him about. Harry thought back about the seven pieces of Riddle's soul.

Riddle's diary

Hufflepuff's cup

Slytherin's locket

Slytherin's ring

Something belonging either to Ravenclaw or Gryffindor

Nagini the snake

Tom Riddle himself

Harry had destroyed the diary four years ago, while Dumbledore had somehow broken Slytherin's ring. Someone with the initials R.A.B. had stolen the locket from the spot where Riddle had hidden it, and it was missing. Riddle's snake would be easy enough to find as would Riddle himself. Harry realized that he would have to have all of the Horcrux pieces identified and destroyed before it made any sense to go after Riddle himself. What he didn't know was whether Riddle knew that Dumbledore or Harry had known about them or not. Harry felt that his job would be a lot easier if Riddle or his Death Eaters weren't specifically guarding them. Harry worried about what Dumbledore might have told Snape, and what he would have reported back to Voldemort.

Harry noticed the door to their compartment open, and was vaguely aware that Ron and Hermione had quietly walked out of the compartment. Moments later the door slammed shut and Harry felt a very painful poke in his ribs. "Potter, I'm going to give you five seconds to get your head out of your arse or I'm going to hex you from here to Kings Cross."

Half in a daze, Harry turned and noticed a lithe redhead standing behind him with her wand pointed at his forehead.

"I'm not kidding you Potter. If you think you can just walk away from me, I'll hurt you so badly you won't even remember your name."

Harry looked at Ginny and gave her a sad smile. "What's up?"

The young redhead was furious and still gathering steam. "What's up? You sat at his funeral and came up with up with your lame, "I don't want to put you in danger BS," and you expect me to stand there while you go off by yourself and get yourself killed? You won't make it that far, Potter." She reached around and grabbed his hair, pulling his face to hers. Several minutes later they broke away, each gasping for air.

Delighted at her kiss, yet not changed of mindset Harry replied, "I'm sorry, Gin, I have to..."

Slap! Ginny hit Harry's cheek so hard that he spun around to the back of the high back seat.

"I don't want you to be sorry Harry. I want you to share your life with me. I want to let you into my life. I don't want you to protect me. I don't want you to hide things from me. I just want you." Tears were streaming down her face. "Don't you get it? I..."

But the words failed her. Looking into his emerald green eyes, she would have gladly stuck her elbow into any butter dish that he might have conjured. "I lo..."

Harry gently touched her cheeks with the tips of her fingers and she froze. "I get it Ginny. Me too." He pulled her closer to him, and just for a minute the wizarding world wasn't at war. For a moment the only thing on Harry's mind was the young witch leaning into him. For a moment, Harry felt peace in his heart.

Ginny faced Harry and asked, "What are you going to do this summer?"

Inconspicuously rubbing the spot where she had slapped him, Harry replied, "I need to spend a week or so with my Aunt, then I'm going to Grimmauld Place for a few days. Then I'm going to visit my parents' graves at Godric's Hollow. Bill's wedding is on the 12th. I'll be leaving after that."

Ginny nodded and said, "Harry, I'm sorry that your year was so horrible, but please don't push me away. I know who you are, beautiful eyes and flaws, and I still want to be with you. Can't you understand that? There aren't any surprises between us."

Harry carefully looked at her and understood the message that she had pounded into him. He certainly felt something for her, but honestly didn't know how to act on his feelings. Tears welled in his eyes as he spoke. "I told the professor that Malfoy was conspiring with Snape. I heard them talking. For years that greasy git was sneaking around plotting, and all I ever heard back was, 'I trust Severus.' Look where his stupid trust got him. He was helping me this last year, and we weren't finished."

Unlike Hermione and Ron, Ginny didn't press Harry for details that he wasn't ready to give out. Rather she looked at him and nodded. A moment later he continued. "We think we found the reason that Riddle didn't die that night when I was a baby, and we think we found a way to make him vulnerable. I know what to do – I just don't think I can do it..."

"By yourself?" She looked at him, and after a minute, he nodded. She asked him, "Why do you need to continue this alone, Frodo?" She smiled at him knowing that he had also read the trilogy.

"It's my quest. The prophecy..."

Rage flew through Ginny. Seeing the red handprint clearly marking his right cheek, she resisted the option to give him a matching set. Instead she shouted, "Did the effen prophecy say that you had to abandon every one of your friends and anyone who might care about you? Did Dumbledore ever tell you to push everyone away? Is that what you want? Why won't you let anyone help you?" Somewhat softer she asked, "Why won't you let me...?"

Harry choked on the words, "I can't."

Whap! "Bull Harry. That's crap. Of course you can." She pushed him back into the seat and for a rare minute, he gave her his undivided attention.

Gasping for air Harry continued, "Dumbledore trusted..."

Ginny raged, "The wrong slime ball. Is that the problem? You don't know who you can trust?"

Harry considered her words for a moment, and realized that she had hit the crux of his concern. He nodded slightly.

Seeing that she had hit her mark, she asked, "Do you trust Ron?" Harry nodded.

"Hermione?" Harry gave another nod.

"Me?" Harry looked at her and nodded again. Seeing a tear slide down his cheek, she pulled his face into her, and ran her fingers through his unkempt hair. "After a minute she asked, "Can you spend a day or two at the burrow before the wedding?"

"Harry nodded, "I think so."

Still stroking his hair, Ginny asked, "What are you going to do for the next few days?"

Harry replied, "I need to go to Gringotts to get some traveling money, then visit with Scrimgeour for a bit. I'll find out if he really can help me or is just trying to help himself."

"Are we OK, Harry? I know Mum won't let me go with you right now, but that doesn't mean that we have to be mad at each other." Her hands gently brushed against his reddened cheeks giving Harry a very pleasant sensation. Harry looked into her bright eyes and nodded. They sat in comfortable silence, each thinking what the coming weeks would bring them. Harry had hoped that he would have had more time to prepare with the professor, but realized that some things couldn't be wished away.

Outside the compartment Ron and Hermione blocked the way of any onlookers. Hermione had cast a silencing charm over the compartment door and let her two friends work out their differences.

Even with it, they had occasionally heard indistinct shouting and thumps as Ginny gained and regained Harry's attention. After ten minutes the noise quieted down and she glanced in to see the two holding each other.

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As the students were traveling home, Alastor Moody called a meeting of Dumbledore's badly splintered militia, the Order of the Phoenix. Gathered in the transfiguration classroom were Minerva McGonagall, Remus Lupin, Nymphadora Tonks, Fred Weasley, George Weasley, Popp Pomfrey, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Hagrid, Molly Weasley, Arthur Weasley, Arabella Figg, Dedalus Diggle, Elphias Dodge, Hestia Jones, Tom the bartender, Sturgis Podmore and Aberforth Dumbledore. Missing were Snape, Mundungus Fletcher and Bill Weasley.

As the members were assembling, there was quite a bit of arguing. None of them had ever heard any succession plans regarding the leadership of the Order. Tensions were high between the haves and the have-nots in terms of knowing the most current information. The teachers and Tonks had been at the castle the day that Snape had killed Dumbledore, and had heard Harry's eyewitness account. Also the little factions that had quietly remained beneath the surface between the members during Dumbledore's tenure had begun to surface. Diggle was arguing loudly with Sturgis while Minerva seemed to be lecturing Fred and George about something. By the time Aberforth and Hagrid arrived, most of the others were in various stages of arguments.

Aberforth waved his wand and a sound like a Chinese gong sounded, momentarily silencing everyone. He said, "You are doing my brother's memory a disservice by arguing amongst yourselves. Since Alastor is the remaining member with the longest tenure, please let him begin the meeting."

Molly gave Tonks one last scowl then sat down next to Arthur.

Minerva handed Moody an envelope and asked him to open it. Moody examined the envelope carefully for a moment and proceeded

to break the seal with his knurled hands. After a moment, he stated, "It's a letter from Dumbledore." In his gravelly voice he began reading it aloud.

"To the members of the Order,

As you may recall, Sir Nicolas de Mimsey Porpington began the Order of the Phoenix over 520 years ago with several ongoing purposes.

- 1) To serve as a militia in the event of a dark, corrupt or inept Minister of Magic
- 2) To identify and fight dark wizards
- 3) To invite and guide the next generation to fulfill these goals as members of the Order

I have updated this letter at the close of each school year, and last revised it on June 6, 1997.

It has been clear to me for the last sixteen years that Harry Potter is the one who has been prophesied to defeat Tom Riddle also known as Lord Voldemort. I have been helping him acquire the knowledge this last year to aid him in defeating Riddle. I would ask each of you to give him your complete support as you have given to me these past years.

Harry will most likely need tutoring in advanced fighting skills as well as fighting skills. Kinglsey, Tonks, and Alastor, please do everything that you can to aid him in acquiring these skills.

Minerva, please assist him in any special spell work that he or his chosen companions may ask for and ask Filius and Poppy to do the same. Please grant them the latitude that they will need, as much of their work will necessarily take them away from the castle.

Remus please arrange to be by his side when Harry needs you. Much of his work in defeating Riddle will need to be done before they

face off together. Harry doubtless has an idea of what needs to be done. He will need help with the actual tasks.

Molly and Arthur, please recognize that Harry stopped being a child the second time he faced Riddle, at age eleven. Despite his youth, he has faced death many times and has always done the right thing. Harry has never chosen the easy path. Either have his friends. The five students who accompanied him last spring all have earned their place in the Order. I ask you both to please do not quarrel with my decision in this regard. They have made their choice to fight for what is right. The Order always needs new blood, and Harry will be more comfortable if his closest peers are also members. He is a good leader and knows what needs to be done.

Dedalus, Harry may wish for some guidance as he comes into control of his rather extensive estate this summer. Please offer to assist him as you can.

Hestia, Arabella, Elphias, Hagrid and Sturgis, I ask you both to continue to serve as you have.

Fred and George, your marvelous inventions may well come in handy. I ask you both to consider how you might help protect those that need emergency protection from the Death Eaters.

Aberforth, we have spoken many times. I ask you to continue working as you have”.

Moody growled and cursed several times as he read and skipped the last few lines. He muttered, “Effen greasy rat shite.” He chose not to read Dumbledore’s final instructions to Snape, who was currently on the run, wanted for the murder of Dumbledore.

Regaining some composure, Moody continued, “Minerva, please issue invitations to join the Order to Luna, Neville, Hermione, Ron, Ginny and Harry as soon as practical.” She nodded.

Moody skipped another line and swore twice. Rolling his eye, he muttered, “Effen thief.” He would never forgive Dung for pilfering Harry’s inherited property.

Finally Moody said, "Dumbledore also mentioned renewing the wards at the other place." He had intended to say Grimmauld place, but smiled when he realized that he couldn't say the name.

Minerva stood and said, "Filius took care of it three days ago. He will hand it over to Potter tomorrow afternoon."

Moody said, "Good. There's also another letter here." He opened it and said, "It's a copy of his will. After examining it for a minute, Moody summarized, saying, "Briefly he requested that his Gringotts account be divided up equally among each of the current Order members in good standing. I guess that's sufficient reason to exclude Snape and Dung. His home in Wales goes to Aberforth. Finally he asked that his personal property not already spoken for be given to Potter. Minerva he asked that you provide a list of those who would receive a share of his vault cash to the Gringotts trust department as soon as practical."

Comfortable with her assignment Minerva nodded, compiled her list, and replied, "Right. I'll see to it this afternoon."

In the past week, the Board of School Governors had named Minerva Headmistress of the school and given her a two-year contract. In reality, Minerva knew that she was a much better administrator and follower than leader. She honestly didn't expect to remain as head more than a term or two before retiring.

Dumbledore had never been a wealthy man in the sense of the Malfoys, Bones, Potters or the Blacks, but working continuously for the last 140 years had given him the opportunity to build quite a nest-egg. As such, the gold that he chose to share with the members of the Order would come in handy for all of them, and be a true blessing for Remus, Molly and Arthur. The meeting ended with the understanding that Moody would call the next meeting.

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As Minerva was delivering Dumbledore's distribution instructions to the Gringotts trust department, Tonks was back on Auror duty

meeting the train at Kings Cross. The majestic steam engine slowed and students disgorged from the twelve cars. Harry and Ron helped unload Ginny and Hermione's trunks then went back and got their own. As Harry was coming out of the train, Ginny had found him a cart for his trunk and cage. They made their way past the platform barrier and out into the Kings Cross station. Harry saw Petunia waiting for him and waved to her. He waved bye to the Weasleys and Grangers, kissed Ginny goodbye and made his way to the Petunia's car.

"Hello, Harry," she said to him in a surprisingly civil voice. She had received a visit from the Minister of Magic Rufus Scrimgeour. He had explained that Voldemort had ordered an attack on Dumbledore and that Harry had done his best to stop it. The reality of Voldemort's return had hit Petunia hard, and brought back memories that she's managed to push away for nearly sixteen years. As a Senior Auror, he had gone to see her years ago to have her confirm Lilly's identity after she had been murdered.

"Hi Aunt Petunia. Where's Dudley?"

"Vernon got him a position at Grunnings for the holidays. They're both at work today," she said as they reached the car. As they had been walking, Harry noticed that the Grangers who were walking a ways in front of them seemed to be arguing with Hermione. Harry waited for Petunia to unlock the boot and lifted his trunk into the car. As he was closing the lid he noticed Mrs. Granger walk over to them.

"Hi Dr. Granger." said Harry, not certain what she wanted.

"Hello Harry. Hello Mrs. Dursley. Harry, I was wondering if we might invite you over for dinner this evening. I apologize for the short notice. Your Aunt would certainly be welcome as well if she wished."

Harry could tell that Petunia was very intimidated by Hermione's mum. Dr. Granger was dressed casually, but quite expensively. He looked at her and nodded, then replied, "I think Aunt Petunia already has plans for the evening, but I'd be happy to have dinner with you."

Petunia looked relieved and said, "I'll have Dudley put your trunk in your room, Harry."

"We'll have him home early in the morning then," said Dr. Granger. "Harry, do you need anything out of your trunk? We've plenty of extra toothbrushes." Harry avoided smirking at the thought of a loo lined wall to wall with packaged toothbrushes.

Knowing that Petunia would be petrified if Harry were to open a wizarding trunk out in public, Harry replied, "I'll be fine. Thanks." Waving again to his Aunt, Harry said, "I'll see you tomorrow. Bye." Harry walked over to Tonks, who he realized was one of his minders, explained what he was doing, and followed Dr. Granger back to their car.

Hermione's mum got into the back seat and invited Harry to sit in front next to her husband. As Harry got in the man held out his hand. "Hi. I'm Dan Granger. You met my wife Emma."

Harry had always been a polite boy. He greeted Hermione's dad, shook his hand and closed the door.

As he began driving, he said, "We're sorry for the short notice Harry. We're quite concerned about what's happening in your, in the wizarding world right now and we wanted to ask your opinion about things as well as to get to know one of Hermione's friends a bit better."

Harry smiled and nodded. Dan's remark somehow seemed in contrast to what he had seen a few minutes earlier. At the same time, Harry was in no hurry to return to his Aunt's house and was happy to have dinner with his friend's parents.

They arrived at the Granger home in Crawley. Harry helped Dan carry Hermione's book laden trunk inside. After settling in, Dan asked Harry what he wanted to drink. "We don't have the butterbeer that Hermione talks about. I have Harp, or Fosters."

"Either would be fine," replied Harry who wasn't certain that he'd had either before. "Can I help with anything?"

"No, thanks," replied Dan handing Harry a pint. "Dinner will be ready in a half hour. Please give these to Hermione and Emma," he said, handing Harry two half-pint glasses.

Several pints and a really great dinner later, the conversation shifted from talk of football and the Royals to events closer to them. Emma asked Harry, "Please tell us what really happened in the last year."

Harry looked at Hermione, who nodded. Harry took that to mean full disclosure. Beginning with the battle at the Department of Mysteries, Harry began telling them what happened within the Wizarding world. Hermione let him go, backfilling only to explain about the D.A. club that they had organized.

Dan and Emma asked specific questions regarding Fudge and Scrimgeour. They were amazed that Harry had spoken with both men many times. Neither he nor Emma had ever personally met the PM.

Hermione let Harry and her parents go for the better part of two hours, during which time Dan refilled everyone's glass a time or two. Finally she told them of the prophecy and the concept of the Horcruxes. Reflecting on her words, Harry muttered, "He knew."

Emma replied, "What did you say, dear?"

Harry said, "He knew. Professor Slughorn. He knew that Riddle knew about Horcruxes because he'd told him about them when Riddle was sixteen. That was Voldemort's name when he was a student at Hogwarts in the early 30s. Riddle committed his first murders when he was in sixth year. First he killed Myrtle then he killed his father and grandparents in Little Hangleton, probably the summer between sixth and seventh year. By the time he had graduated he probably had created two or more Horcruxes, beginning with his diary, a ring and locket that originally belonged to one of the school's founders, Salazar Slytherin. He may have killed Morfin Gaunt as well.

Dan asked, "What does that have to do with Professor Slughorn?"

Hermione replied, "When Voldemort disappeared after murdering Harry's parents and the killing curse rebounding off of Harry when he was a baby, Professor Slughorn knew that he hadn't been killed. Apparently he never told anyone about it." She looked at Harry in shock, as he nodded confirmation of what she was thinking.

Harry continued, "Riddle had figured out a way to split off bits of his soul and embed them within other objects to keep them bound to Earth. When he got his body back in the graveyard, he told his Death Eater followers that his 'soul had been ripped from his body,' but since it wasn't all free, he didn't die. Ten years later he inhabited the body of one of the school teachers, Professor Quirrell, grew stronger and started on the path of coming back. My point was that Professor Slughorn could have told someone like Professor Dumbledore what he knew and they would have had years to find and destroy the Horcruxes."

Hermione and her parents nodded, each taking in information that was both fascinating and quite frightening.

Harry continued, "Riddle must have left his diary with Lucius Malfoy for safe keeping without telling him what it really was. I bet Riddle was really pissed when he found out that Malfoy had given it to Ginny and it had been destroyed."

Hermione asked, "Did Professor Dumbledore ever say where he got the ring from?"

Harry replied, "No. I don't know if he'd hurt his hand getting the ring, or destroying it."

While they had been talking, Emma had been taking notes. After Dan came back from the loo, she summarized saying, "This Riddle needed to have committed one or more murders for each of the soul splitting procedures that he did." She showed them her notes.

Murders

1943 – Myrtle

1943 – Riddle’s father

1943 – Riddle’s grandfather

1943 – Riddle’s grandmother

Horcruxes created

Diary – CoS

Ring – 1943

? – 1943

Cup – 1945

Locket – 1945

Snake – 1945 – 1980

Emma said, “Harry you mentioned that Riddle came back shortly after he had graduated from school and had asked for a job. Does anything seem odd about that?”

Harry thought long and hard, trying to recall the different conversations that he’d had with the headmaster. After a few minutes one came to mind. “I remember talking to Riddle when I was in my second year. He said that Dumbledore began keeping an eye on him and, he wasn’t able to get back into the Chamber of Secrets.”

Hermione nodded, and replied, “Maybe that’s why he wanted to come back to the castle, to be able to go back and retrieve something that he’d left there.”

Dan quipped, “He couldn’t come up to the headmaster and say, Excuse me, I left a bit of my soul in one of the dungeons. Could I possibly go and retrieve it?”

Harry wasn’t certain if it was the effects of the beer, or the grim humor of the situation, but the four of them had a good laugh together.

It was getting late when Dan asked, "So who's really working on getting rid of this wanker?"

Harry said, "Professor Dumbledore and I were out searching for one of the pieces the day that..."

"Emma saw the pain that Harry was in, and finished adding, "The night that he was murdered?"

Harry nodded, and she went over to hug him.

Dan asked, "What happened?"

Hermione put her hand to her mouth, shocked that her father would ask, but Harry seemed to want to talk about it. "We arrived back to the village by the castle and saw the Dark Mark over the astronomy tower. A student named Malfoy had found a way to sneak a bunch of Voldemort's Death Eaters into the castle. We flew on broomsticks up to the astronomy tower. I was wearing my invisibility cloak and when we landed, I think the professor immobilized me. I could see everything but I couldn't move. The professor was very weak at the time from the effects of a potion that he'd drunk while we were out."

Finishing his beer, Harry continued, "Malfoy managed to disarm the professor. Dumbledore tried to get as much information from Malfoy as he could, and I think to stall for time. Anyway, Malfoy didn't have much of an appetite to murder an unarmed headmaster. A minute later, one of Dumbledore's instructors came up and killed him. Dumbledore was pleading with him, and Snape killed him, just like that."

Hermione and her mum both had tears streaming down their faces as Harry finished. "A moment after Dumbledore died, they ran away. His spell wore off, and I chased them, but I didn't catch them. The Aurors killed one of Malfoy's accomplices, and captured a few of the Death Eaters, and a couple students had been arrested immediately after the funeral."

Dan asked, "So how is this your fault, Hermione?"

Harry had no idea what Dr. Granger was talking about and turned to his friend as she sobbed, "Harry told me that Malfoy was up to something. He'd been telling me all year, and I ignored him."

Dan was stunned, and for once the normally quick thinking man, couldn't find the right words to say. Harry responded, "Hermione, it's no more your fault than Flitwick's. I told you, Ron, Mr. Weasley, Professor McGonagall and Dumbledore himself several times. No one caught on with what he was doing in the Room of Requirement. A lot of things went wrong. No one blames Tonks for surviving last year at the Ministry of Magic. I'm just glad that you're alive."

Dan was glad that he'd said nothing. Hermione's friend had found better words than he'd ever have been able to come up with.

A lot had been said, and emotions were spent. They all sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes. Finally Emma said, "Harry it's late. We all need some rest. Let me show you to your room. When they reached the door, she said, "Thank you for sharing your story with us. It cleared the air about a lot of things for us."

Harry looked at his friend's mum and said, "You're welcome. Goodnight Dr. Granger." He closed the door behind him and slept fitfully in the comfortable bed, thinking over and over that Slughorn wasted ten years. Harry wondered how many lives would be lost trying to make up that time.

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Chapter 2

A/Ns

The stated pairing (main characters of this story, no slash) are Tommy Riddle and Harry Potter. In this, the final act, everyone else is but a bit player. I can't speak for JKR's version, but in this story Dumbledore really is dead, and Snape is turning into a bad, bad man. This story will switch back and forth from the point of view of the light side and the point of view of the dark side. Neither are potted plants and in many cases, several actions are happening at once.

The long-term relationships will be determined by who survives. I think it was very much in character to start the story with Ginny and Harry righting their relationship. Ron and Hermione are presumed to be "in like" with each other at the beginning of the story.

I previously made a promise regarding one of Harry's friends. I intend to keep that promise.

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Sit back, enjoy the ride. Thank you for flying Old-Crow airways.

Story

As Emma was saying goodnight to Harry, Severus and Draco were hidden a quarter mile away from Snape's dilapidated home at Spinner's End. It was being systematically searched and everything of value was being removed by a large group of Aurors.

Despite the planning that Malfoy had made to get the Death Eaters into the castle, neither man had made any preparations for life on the run. Draco looked at Snape with some concern, asking "Now what, Professor?" It had become apparent to Snape that the Dark Lord had not really expected Malfoy to survive, let alone that they would have been successful in murdering Dumbledore. Life on the run had not

been easy for either of them. Between them, they had two wands and three galleons.

In truth, Snape had not been part of the original plan, nor had he known the exact planned moment of the attack. Rosmerta, under the Imperious curse, had been forced to send word to Malfoy that Dumbledore had left the castle on an errand. Malfoy had used the repaired Vanishing Cabinet as well as the one in Knockturn Alley to get four Death Eaters into the castle past the wards. Once there, McGonagall had asked Flitwick to alert Snape that the castle was under attack, expecting that he would help defend the castle, not murder the Headmaster. Damn that Unbreakable Vow. Snape had been forced to help Malfoy, and his life had been forever changed. He had left his vault key and other valuables in his office.

Draco whispered, "I'm surprised that there are so many Aurors at your home."

Snape replied, "It is to be expected. We have become the two most hunted men in Britain."

Draco shook his head and said, "You surely haven't forgotten the Dark Lord?"

Snape silently wondered at the lack of intelligence that Lucius' son occasionally displayed, intelligence closer to Goyle's level than Granger's. Snape hissed, "Every Auror would rather be assigned to tracking you and me down than the Dark Lord. They must have all volunteered for the duty." In truth, the same thing was happening at Malfoy Manor as they were speaking. Narcissa Malfoy would be homeless within the hour.

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Voldemort had abandoned using Riddle Manor as a hideout, and had wisely elected to stay away from the Malfoy estate as well. He was currently staying at the home of a couple of muggles that he'd murdered earlier in the week. With him were Wormtail and Bellatrix. Pettigrew had informed Riddle that Snape had completed Draco's

assignment. He asked, "Master, should I find Snape and Draco and bring them here?"

Riddle considered the idea for a moment and replied, "No. Find them, but leave them be for a few days. I want to see find out how resourceful they are on their own. Bring them back here Friday evening. Don't let them see you." The little rat bowed and scurried away."

In truth, the death of Dumbledore aside, the last year had not gone well for Riddle. Between the capture of his senior Death Eaters at the Ministry, and the removal of Fudge, he had lost much of his power base. Lucius had done much in the years that he'd been gone to weaken the Ministry and place either weak or bigoted people in positions of either power or influence. Much of that had taken place under the lie that Riddle had been killed, or through the purchase of influence or votes.

The last two years had seen a reversal of many of those changes. The board of school governors had lost three dark side members, Umbridge had been found lacking in any diplomacy skills and now was up on charges. Scrimgeour had proven to be a much tougher Minister than Fudge.

"What would you have me do next, Master?" asked Bellatrix, watching the Dark Lord stroke the snake's head.

Riddle thought for a moment and replied, "Without Dumbledore to guide the boy, he is all but defenseless. According to Draco, he has no great skills other than luck. I shall finish him off this summer. Find where he is staying. He cannot stay with his muggle relatives forever. When Wormtail returns, have him look in on that flock of red-headed blood-traitors and see what they are up to. Send for Nott's son and Goyle. I want to see them tomorrow morning."

Bella nodded and took her leave without commenting. In truth, she had been bested by Potter a year ago, and had considerably more respect for him than to pass his accomplishments off as mere luck.

... --- ... ---

Early the next morning Theodore Nott was nervous to see Bellatrix Lestrangle walk into the family room of his parents' home. He had seen her in his home several times the previous summer after his father had been captured. He was fairly certain that she had provided his mother with the funds to send him to school the last year and for her to live on. In truth, Bellatrix had done that with funds that the Dark Lord had arranged to be drawn from the Malfoy account.

Bellatrix looked the teen in the eye and said, "Good afternoon Theodore. You will come with me. The Dark Lord wishes to speak to you." Nott had spoken enough with Draco to realize that this was not a request, rather an order. She picked up his copy of Quidditch Weekly and created a Portkey. Before handing it to him, she hissed, "You will kneel in front of the Dark Lord and not look at him until he calls for you to rise." She tapped the magazine, and together they vanished.

If Nott was nervous in the presence of Lestrangle, he did not show it. He was in fact terrified to be in the presence of the Dark Lord. He followed Bellatrix from the kitchen where they had appeared into the sitting room. Quickly noticing the huge snake coiled up at the side of a high backed chair, his fear only grew. Bellatrix knocked on the doorframe and said, "Master, Theodore Nott is here at your request."

Riddle hissed, "Enter Theodore, and come before me."

Nott did as he was told, and knelt down as Lestrangle had told him.

Voldemort spoke in a low but commanding voice. "How is your mother?"

In his best Slytherin thinking, Nott replied, "Sir, she is getting by, thanks to your generosity. Thank you." His voice was even, and barely cracked from fear.

"I'm told that you did well in school this year, better than Draco, though I don't think he is concerned about his grades at this point. Has he contacted you?"

“No sir.” Riddle was using Legilimency to test the boy, and found him to be telling the truth.

“I want you to deliver this to Borgin at his shop in Knockturn Alley. If he is not there, wait for him outside the door. He will be there before nightfall.” Riddle handed Nott a quill and said, “He will know how to use it.”

Nott nodded and said, “Yes, sir.”

Riddle commanded Nott to rise and face him. Screwing up his courage, Nott did so, and looked Riddle in the eye without flinching. Riddle nodded, pointed to a bag of Galleons on the table next to him and said, “Give this to your mother after you have completed your task. Bellatrix will give you a portkey back to your home. You will register for school for the fall term, and appear to support McGonagall. Keep your eyes and ears open for news of Potter this summer. Say nothing of this meeting to anyone. Do not fail me. Leave now.”

Nott replied, “Thank you sir,” and went back into the kitchen. Moments later he was back in his own sitting room. The bag that the Dark Lord had given him contained 5,000 Galleons. Nott left the bag on the kitchen table for his mum.

Using the floo network, Nott appeared at the Leaky Cauldron at 7AM. He didn’t notice the mousy haired girl who was paying her breakfast tab walk out the door shortly after him. He made his way directly to Knockturn alley and went to Borgin’s shop. The sign on the door said, Closed. For two hours Nott went from shop to shop, occasionally going back to Borgin and Burkes, checking to see if it had reopened. Finally about noon he saw the sign in the window had been switched to Open. Nott walked in the door, took out the quill, set it on the counter and immediately walked out. From there, he went back to the leaky cauldron and took the floo back to his home.

... --- ... ---

After Nott left, Borgin looked around the shop to be certain that there were no other customers wandering around the cramped isles. He locked the front door and went back to the counter. Borgin dipped the

quill in the special ink, set the quill on a parchment, tapped it and said the prearranged incantation. The quill scratched out the message.

Withdraw 100,000 galleons from the account and be prepared to leave by midnight.

The quill set itself down on the edge of the parchment and within seconds, both had burst into flame leaving no ashes.

Borgin was surprised that he hadn't heard from either the Death Eaters or the Aurors prior to this time. He had no way of knowing that Draco had bragged to Dumbledore about how he'd snuck the Death Eaters into the castle from the cabinet in Borgin's shop while Harry was hidden just feet away from the professor. He was relatively certain that his days in the shop were numbered and took several of the more expensive objects with him as he locked up for the day.

... --- ... ---

Acting on Lestrangle's words, Peter Pettigrew apparated to within a half mile of Ottery St. Catchpole, assumed his rat form and scurried across the woods to the edge of the Weasley property. Seeing no one outside he scurried to the planted flowerbed and found an empty gnome hole to hide in, hoping that he might pick up some useful information without being seen.

Several hours later, Fleur walked out leading a wedding consultant behind her. The mesmerized man took notes as she explained the arrangements that she wanted for the wedding. "Remember, zee ceremony is at five o'clock in the afternoon on zee nineteenth of July. You must have everything set up by two so zer will be time for some photographs." She smiled once and the man nodded before leaving. She could have asked the man to swim the channel with his arms tied together and he would have agreed.

A few hours later Pettigrew was woken out of a restful slumber. A garden gnome had seized his tail and had sunk its razor sharp teeth into the pencil-thick tail, nearly severing it. Pettigrew turned and slashed the little gnome in the throat with his equally sharp silver paw. The little gnome died moments later.

Bleeding badly, Pettigrew raced out of the hole across the yards and into the woods as fast as he could. Feeling like he would pass out at any minute, he crossed the property line and changed back to his human form. Tapping the portkey that Lestrangle had given him, he vanished and appeared in the kitchen before passing out.

... --- ... ---

It was an unlikely pair that were photographed robbing the BP station several miles away from where Severus Snape, former potions master, former professor, used to have a home. Minutes after the home had been stripped of all of its contents, it had been torched and was now little more than a crumbled hearth and ashes.

The BP attendant had been stunned, the cash drawer opened. Oddly enough, the only things taken were a case of beer, several tins of Altoids, a bottle of shampoo, three loaves of bread and all of the coins that were in the drawer. The hapless thieves left all of the banknotes. A customer came in several minutes later and awoke the attendant who summoned the police. In reviewing the video tape, investigators concluded that the attendant was knocked unconscious after being hit with a pole or other object that one of the men must have been carrying. The police nicknamed the pair, the coin collector bandits and posted their photographs in local police stations, public houses and video arcades. The photo had remarkable clarity of both men, who apparently hadn't noticed the camera or the sign in the front door warning that the entire premises was under video surveillance. Remarkably, the men ran away on foot, apparently moving away from the field of view of the camera suddenly.

Convinced that the Dark Lord had wanted them elsewhere for a while, they broke into a vacant muggle home several miles away. Without specifically being summoned, they had no clear way of knowing where the Dark Lord was. Due to Wormtail's injury, Riddle decided to leave them on their own for a week.

... --- ... ---

As Nott was visiting with Riddle, Emma Granger was making Hermione and Harry breakfast. Dan had left earlier with early morning appointments at the surgery.

Handing him his plate loaded with pancakes and bangers, she smiled at him and said, "Harry, Dan and I wanted to thank the both of you for being so candid with us last night. We know that you were uncomfortable with much of what was said, but I think for everyone's sake, it needed to be said. You have certainly suffered more than your share of horrors and betrayals, and nothing that Dan or I could say could ever minimize that."

Hermione said, "Mum, I think it helped both Harry and me to have someone to talk these things over with. There's a lot to do, and it helped organize my thoughts about what needs to be done. I'm sure that Harry feels the same way."

Never as articulate as his friend, Harry nodded in agreement.

Emma screwed up her own courage and asked the question to which she dreaded hearing the answer. "Harry, what can Dan and I do to help you in your quest?"

Harry had hoped against hope that one or the other of them would have asked the question. He responded with his usual less than verbose style, saying simply, "Disappear."

Both Emma and Hermione gave him a questioning look. Harry expounded on his answer saying, "The best thing that the two of you could do would be to go to New Zealand for a few months. I think it's highly likely that your home will be attacked in the next few days and I'd hate to see you get hurt or worse." Harry had come to realize that there truly were things worse than death.

He continued, "If you can't leave Britain, I have a home in London that I think might be safe for you all to stay at. You don't need to answer right now, but please consider it and if I can help, please let me know."

Just then, there was a knock on the door. Somewhat shaken by Harry's words, Emma went to answer it.

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As Emma was about to answer the door, Auror Tonks spotted Theodore Nott walk through the Leakey Cauldron. Quickly paying her bill, she followed him, being careful not to be noticed. As she followed Nott into Knockturn Alley, she saw him attempt to enter the closed Borgin shop. She gave the signal and her partner for the week, Auror Michael Wood, who was under one of the department invisibility cloaks, stood outside the door. Several hours later he followed Borgin into the shop and waited. Fifteen minutes later he had read the message as the parchment ignited. He followed Borgin as he left his shop and locked the door.

Twenty minutes later Wood was in the office of Magical Law Enforcement Director Connie Hammer who had been promoted when Amelia Bones had been murdered a year ago. Hammer was a no-nonsense woman who, like her predecessor, had more than earned her way up the ladder of a mostly male organization. She was a good investigator and a good leader.

"Who do you want assigned at Gringotts?" asked Wood.

"See who's available. My preference would be to use yourself, Shepherd, Dawlish, and either Tonks or Steele depending on who is available." She expected Borgin to come alone and give up without a fight, but didn't want to lose any Aurors today, and decided to overstaff for the capture.

"Tonks is assigned to Potter for the next 48 hours. I could ask..."

"No. Use Steele instead. Tonks is a good match up with Potter. Good work today Wood."

In reality, Wood had done little of the real legwork, and was willing to admit it. He responded, saying, "Tonks picked him up first, Director."

Hammer realized that this operation had the potential to be a huge win for the light side. She smiled at him and replied, "Nonetheless, good work."

Wood was pleased. Hammer didn't give out praise often, but when she did, it was heartfelt. He replied, "Thank you Director. I'll make the arrangements to have everyone in position as soon as they open"

"Good. Contact me as soon as he comes in."

... --- ... ---

Back in Crawley, Emma opened the door. It was Professor McGonagall and Remus Lupin.

"Please come in," said Emma.

Remus spoke first. "Good morning, Dr. Granger. It's good to see you again. Harry, if you're ready to go, I can take you to your Aunt and Uncle's home now."

Harry nodded, and said, "I'm ready now. Hermione, Dr. Granger, thank you for dinner and having me over last night. Please consider my offer."

Emma and Hermione both nodded and gave him a hug, and they got up to leave. As they made their way to the back door, McGonagall said, "I'll see you later, Mr. Potter."

They walked out to the back garden and Remus pulled out a pencil. They both grasped it, and an instant later they were in the back garden of number 4 Privet Drive.

... --- ... ---

Petunia Dursley had been looking out the back window from her kitchen when she saw the two men appear. Momentarily startled, she recognized Harry, and smiled at the magic that she had just seen. She knew that the years had not been easy for Harry, but a small part

of her was happy to see him again, knowing that he would soon leave and likely not return. She opened the back door and invited them in.

Offering both of them tea, she announced that she had to go to the grocery market, and would be back in a few hours.

Harry replied, "I need to go to Gringotts later. Would you like me to help with dinner?"

Petunia looked thinner than Harry remembered. She replied, "I have time. We'll eat at six after Vernon and Dudley get home."

Remus said, "Tonks should be meeting us here within an hour. You can get ready, we can visit for a bit to catch up until she gets here, and then we can go."

Curious if Harry was interested in anyone, Petunia asked, "Who's Tonks?"

Remus replied, "She is one of the Ministry Aurors. She offered to..." Remus considered his words – watch Harry, guard Harry, be his minder, bodyguard? None of them seemed to fit, and he didn't want to anger or embarrass Harry by saying the wrong thing. He continued, saying, "assist Harry. He has some business to transact at the wizarding bank that she could help with."

Satisfied with his answer, Petunia excused herself and went to the Tesco grocery store. After she left, Remus said, "Harry, it looks like you have a busy day ahead of you. How did things go at the Grangers?"

Harry realized that Remus wasn't prying or implying anything. It was just a straight question. He answered, "I told them what has been happening in the wizarding world. In general terms, I let them know what the professor and I had been working on for the last year."

Harry was somewhat pleased to see the look of confusion on Lupin's face. Apparently the professor hadn't told the Order about the Horcruxes. He continued, "I told them in no uncertain terms that the

professor's death wasn't Hermione's fault, and no one would ever think that it was."

Lupin nodded in agreement, but didn't say anything hoping that Harry would keep talking. Harry continued, "Moony, did the professor ever mention what he was working on to the Order?"

Remus was surprised, and responded, "Of course he did. We talked about Death Eater sightings, events at the Ministry, the sacking of Fudge. He always kept us up to speed on events." Seeing Harry's expression, Remus finished, asking, "Didn't he?"

Harry asked, "Did he ever talk about the prophecy?"

Remus replied, "He said that it contained information that could be used against Voldemort. He told us that it concerned you."

Glancing out the window and seeing the perky Auror with pink hair coming to the door, Harry asked, "Do you absolutely trust Tonks?"

Without hesitation, Remus replied, "With my life."

Harry asked, "With mine?"

Remus nodded, and Harry opened the door, greeting her. "Hi Tonks. You look very tidy today."

"Wotcher Harry." She smiled at him, gave him a hug, then leaned up to Remus and gave him a peck on the cheek.

"Have a seat, Tonks. I think Harry has something that he wants to talk with us about." Tonks was about to fire off a cheeky comment, but glanced at the serious look on Lupin's face and immediately complied.

Harry paced for a moment then said, "You've obviously read the Prophet and their take about me being The Chosen One?" They both nodded, but didn't say a word. Harry took a breath and said, "For once they were right in one."

Remus remained silent while Tonks took a second to sort through Harry's words and asked, "You mean...?"

Harry replied, "The prophecy that you were all guarding for a year... It was about Riddle and me. In short, it said that either of us must die by the other's hand. Dumbledore had heard it several months before I was born. He told it to me the night of the battle at the Ministry. We figured out why Riddle didn't die the night that he killed my parents and were working on a way to finish him off."

In the twenty five seconds that Harry had been talking, Remus felt the weight of the world crash onto his shoulders, sadness at the remembrance of two of his best friends, and relief at the prospect of the weight being partially lifted. He simply asked, "How?"

Harry said, "I was hoping to talk about that after we got back."

Remus replied, "I meant, how have you managed to cope for a year? Most people would be crushed carrying a burden like that. How do you do it?"

Harry smiled at the two, and replied, "By having good friends, I guess. Are we ready to go?"

Tonks said, "I have a portkey already made. Let me run to the loo first, then I'll be ready."

... --- ... ---

As Remus was talking to Harry, the Ministry Aurors had gotten themselves into position. Dawlish and Shepherd were stationed outside the doors under invisibility cloaks. Wood and Steele were inside the lobby, disillusioned. Unfortunately, none of them had a clear idea of what Borgin really looked like, as none of them had ever spoken with him.

Diagon Alley was unusually crowded that day. Perhaps it was the prospect of so many students being home schooled in the fall, the fact that term had ended, or just fate, but no one noticed the well-

dressed, grey haired man walk in carrying an expensive looking oversized briefcase.

After closing up his shop, Borgin had apparated to his home, put on his best robes and applied a glamour charm to change his appearance from that of an older looking version of greasy Snape to a younger looking man with longish neatly washed and trimmed hair.

Borgin went to the counter, and handed the goblin the vault key. After examining it for nearly a half minute, the goblin called for another goblin to escort Borgin to the vault.

... --- ... ---

Tonks came back to the living room at Privet Drive. Harry and Remus were ready to go. They went out to the back garden, and Harry locked the door behind him. Each touching the pencil, they were transported to the Leakey Cauldron. Tom nodded at the three as they walked through and left through the back door. They quickly made their way up the alley to the marble steps of Gringotts.

They waited in line for a few moments at the counter. Harry asked if Griphook could take him to his vault. The counter goblin replied, "He's just finishing with another customer over there. Please stop by the counter when you complete your business Mr. Potter. One of the Trust Goblins would like to speak with you."

Borgin had magically expanded the case and charmed it to be one fiftieth of the actual weight. Even so, it was quite heavy, and Borgin was worried that the locks would break. Griphook stopped the cart and held out a hand to help the wizard out of the cart. Brushing off the goblin, Borgin managed to get out of the cart and lifted the heavy case out of the cart and to his side.

As Harry was walking from the counter to the cart, Griphook said to the man, "Good day sir."

Borgin sneered, "Good day yourself."

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A/Ns

Evenscense by Creative Quill is a new story that I'm following and is well worth a look.

Thanks to Steve for taking a good look at my writing before sending it out the door.

Does anyone have an opinion regarding the Horcruxes weakening Riddle as they get destroyed?

Could he tell when Dumbledore smashed the ring?

Would they all need to be found and destroyed?

Chapter 3 should be up early next week.

O-C

A/Ns

Thanks for the kind words. I was surprised that there was so much consistency in the idea that Riddle wouldn't be significantly impacted until all or most of the Horcruxes were destroyed.

Someone noticed that I've gone two whole chapters with no Ron bashing. Oh well.

Thanks to Steve for pre-reading my work.

Chapter 3

"Good day, yourself."

For an instant, Harry's mind raced back to the memory of being in Borgin and Burke's shop in Knockturn Alley. He would never forget the conversation that Lucius Malfoy and the shopkeeper had had while the twelve year old Harry had hidden in the vanishing cabinet.

As the grey haired man walked by, Harry whipped out his wand and wordlessly stunned him. Borgin stumbled as he fell, dropping the case. Borgin's intuition regarding the case had been correct. When it hit the marble floor the latches gave way revealing a rather large pile of gold.

Wood appeared out from under his invisibility cloak a moment later at the other end of the counter. He shouted, "Seal the main entrance."

Dawlish ran over, demanding, "What did you do now Potter? Who is this? You've ruined an important investigation."

Harry ignored Dawlish, pointed his wand at the grey haired man lying on the floor and said, "Finite Incantatem." Moments later, greasy haired shopkeeper Thomas Borgin was visible for all to see.

Dawlish stammered, "H, How did you know?"

Harry never did like the man. He simply said, "I just did. He helped in the murder of Professor Dumbledore."

A half dozen Aurors led by Director Hammer came through the front door and quickly made their way over. "Good work, Auror Dawlish." A moment later, she saw Tonks, Harry Potter and another man standing nearby.

Tonks, who never really cared for Dawlish or his snobbish remarks said, "Director, Auror Dawlish never even saw Borgin. Harry Potter recognized him even though Borgin was wearing a glamour and stunned him." She scowled at Dawlish.

"I see," said Hammer. "Well done, Mr. Potter. Thank you for your diligence against the dark side. You doubtless had other business that you were here for. If possible, could you stop by my office sometime Saturday morning? I'd like to visit with you if you have the time."

Recognizing that it really wasn't a request, Harry nodded, and said, "I'll be there at nine."

Hammer nodded at him and replied, "Good. I'll have tea waiting. Auror Tonks, perhaps you could accompany Mr. Potter as well. Thank you. Enjoy your day, Mr. Potter."

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As they walked over to Griphook who was waiting at the cart, Tonks said, "Cor Harry, you were fast in stunning him. How did you know it was Borgin?"

Somewhat embarrassed, Harry replied, "The first time I ever used the floo network, I accidentally ended up in his shop as he was doing business with Lucius Malfoy. I hid in the vanishing cabinet that Draco used to sneak the Death Eaters into Hogwarts. I recognized his voice when he was talking to Griphook."

"Well done, Harry," said Remus, patting him on the back. A moment later Tonks went back and quietly spoke to Hammer for a few minutes then returned.

While they were waiting for Tonks, Griphook asked, "Which vault, Mr. Potter?"

"Uh..." replied Harry.

Remus had anticipated some confusion about this from Harry and said, "Harry, you have at least three vaults – one or more from the Black estate, your parents' vault, probably one from the Potter estate, and the school vault that your parents set up for you. What do you need right now?"

"Some Galleons and currency."

"Why don't you use your school vault, if you have enough in it to accommodate what you had in mind?" suggested Remus.

Harry nodded, gave Griphook his vault number and considered how much gold and currency he thought that he'd need. When they got to the vault, Griphook stopped the cart, helped Harry out and said, "Key please."

Harry handed him the key and a moment later opened the door to vault 687. Harry scooped out about 5,000 galleons, thought for a moment and scooped another 2,000. He lifted the heavy sack, and walked back to the cart. Remus noticed the weight of the sack, and said, "If you wish, I'll do a lightening charm on it for you. There's no sense in getting two use of underage magic notices in one day."

Harry had bad memories of the last time that he'd received such a notice, and said, "Thanks."

Tonks said, "Harry, don't worry about that. You'll probably get a reward for stunning Borgin, not punished."

Harry said, "I'm not so sure. The last time, I faced a full Wizengamot hearing. The professor got me out of that one."

Remus smiled sadly. Nothing was ever easy for James' son.

... --- ... ---

Scrimgeour and Hammer were being direct with Borgin in the conference room that they were using at Gringotts. Hammer had immediately contacted Scrimgeour as soon as she verified that Borgin had been captured transporting a significant amount of gold. The news that Tonks had relayed to her about Borgin being involved in Dumbledore's murder had made her job much easier.

Scrimgeour realized that many of Voldemort's supporters were funding him, while Riddle was funding others to do his bidding. No matter which side you were on, running a war wasn't cheap.

He took a chance that Borgin hadn't emptied the vault where he'd gotten the money and said, "Here is my one and only deal for you - Take us back down to the vault where you got that gold, empty the vault for us and you will be sent to a wizarding prison outside the country for a one year stay. Or do nothing, go on trial as a conspirator for the murder of Albus Dumbledore, get convicted as you certainly will, and get kissed this Saturday."

Borgin realized that his life was forfeit if he was released from prison and the Dark Lord was still in power. He replied, "Two years, and my wife goes with me."

"Done," replied Scrimgeour. Two hours later the funds had been tallied and transferred to the Ministry Law Enforcement account vault. Just over three million Galleons were recovered, not including the hundred thousand that Borgin had been caught with. Scrimgeour and Hammer both hoped that the loss of funds would create a serious problem for Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Scrimgeour told Hammer to bring the case that Borgin was carrying back to Ministry Headquarters.

... --- ... ---

While Scrimgeour and Hammer were talking with the Borgin, Harry was talking with another of the Goblins regarding his accounts.

The old goblin looked at Harry from across the desk. He deemed the young man as someone to trust and worthy of his help. He said, "Mr.

Potter. You control several of the larger accounts at this branch. Combined they represent the largest of our private accounts, second only to the Ministry accounts. According to our records, you have not even visited four of your vaults. I would recommend that you take the time to meet with your account advisors and learn about them.”

Harry knew that Pickhandle's advice was sound and nodded in agreement. Pickhandle continued. “I also recommend that you start building a large family as soon as practical. You should create a multi-tiered Will to protect your wishes in the event of an untimely death.”

“I see,” replied Harry.

Pickhandle continued, “Fortunately, I gave your father similar advice immediately after you were born, and you had sufficient means to get by with until your seventeenth birthday, which I believe is a few weeks from now.”

Harry nodded and asked, “Who are my account managers?”

Pickhandle replied, “Liplock and Clawhammer. They both have worked with the larger old family accounts for a long time.”

“I see,” replied Harry. He interpreted old family to mean pureblood. He asked, “Can I pick an account manager, or are they always assigned?”

“You can have your choice of any of the employees. Did you have someone in mind?”

Harry replied, “Actually I did, Bill Weasley and Griphook.”

Pickhandle wasn't surprised that Harry had made such a request. He knew of Harry having requested Griphook's assistance before, but didn't know that he knew Weasley. Pickhandle replied, “I shall make the changes. Mr. Weasley was injured recently and won't be back for a few more days. I shall inform him when he returns.”

“Thank you,” replied Harry.

"Is there anything else that we might be able to assist you with today?"

"I wanted to convert half of this for Sterling notes. I have some shopping to do." Pickhandle tapped the table twice. A goblin appeared, took the sack with him and returned a moment later with Harry's bag, now half filled with gold, and a five-inch stack of fifty Pound notes. He handed both back to Harry, and said, "It was a pleasure to serve you today, Mr. Potter."

Harry looked at the young goblin and replied, "Thank you." He also turned to Pickhandle and said, "Thank you for your advice. I will be back in a month or so."

Pickhandle nodded, and said, "You're welcome, Mr. Potter. I will have Griphook prepare the papers and show Mr. Weasley what he will need to learn." He opened the door for Harry and pointed him back to the lobby.

Harry met Tonks and Remus waiting in the lobby. Tonks saw him and said, "Cor Harry. You were in with Pickhandle for over an hour."

"Sorry," replied Harry. "He had a lot to talk about."

Tonks shook her head and said, "That wasn't my point Harry. He wouldn't give the Minister of Magic an hour of his time. He runs the London branch of Gringotts."

"Was he able to help you?" asked Remus, a bit more quietly than his spirited friend. Harry noticed his threadbare robes and knew what he wanted to do.

"Yes," replied Harry. "I changed account managers."

Remus didn't know much about the account managers that Gringotts assigned to the larger accounts. Compared to his own, the Weasley vault was huge. He replied, "What did you decide to do?"

Harry replied, "I requested that Bill Weasley and Griphook be assigned to my accounts."

Tonks was surprised and said, "And Pickhandle agreed? I don't think there are any other wizards who are account managers. I bet Bill will be surprised."

"I hope he'll be OK with it," said Harry. "I just wanted to work with people who I trust. The other two sounded kind of dodgy to me."

"What do you mean?" asked Remus.

"They mostly worked with pure blood accounts. I really don't want the Malfoy account managers minding my accounts."

"I understand," said Remus. "Where to next?"

"I need some new robes and some regular stuff to wear as well. Do we have enough time?"

They both nodded, and headed out the re-opened doors over to Madam Malkin's. Harry talked to one of the assistants for a moment, who went in back. A moment later, Madam Malkin herself came out. Harry told her that he wanted four sets of robes for himself and the same number for Tonks and Remus.

"What did you have in mind, my dear?" she asked.

"Two sets of dress robes and two nicer sets for everyday wear."

She nodded, and then asked, "Let's do the everyday sets first. What colors did you have in mind?"

Harry thought for a second and replied, "Grey and burgundy." He'd worn nothing but black robes at school and wanted something different.

While Madam Malkin was measuring Harry and pinning up different fabrics, the two assistants came out. Madam Malkin nodded at them and then went to Remus and Tonks respectively. Remus started to

protest, but Tonks cut him off, saying, "Look Remus, Harry wants to do something nice for you. Give him a break. He doesn't need another fight on his hands. Enjoy it. OK?" She winked at Harry who smiled back.

An hour later, Madam Malkin announced, "I'll have these delivered to each of you tomorrow afternoon." Harry thanked her and the assistants, paid the bill and they left.

"Thank you, Harry," said Tonks and Remus. "Where to next?"

A wand holder, watch, new glasses, stacks of muggle clothing, trainers, dragon hide boots, dress shoes and the rest in shrunken sacks in hand, Harry pleaded with Tonks to go back to Privet Drive. They returned and greeted Aunt Petunia.

"Where have you been?" asked Petunia.

"We've been out shopping, and Harry went with," said Remus, a bit amazed with the morning's events.

"And Harry, here, caught a dangerous criminal," said Tonks.

"I see," replied Petunia. "A Mrs. Hopkirk was here to see you this morning. Are you in some kind of trouble again?"

"I expect so," replied Harry, suddenly a lot less pleased with himself.

"She left this for you," said Petunia, not happy to see her nephew in trouble with the law again. She handed him a thick, official looking envelope.

"Better open it," said Remus, also a lot less happy than he was earlier.

Dear Mr. Potter,

You have quite enough to be worrying about without any more receiving underage notifications from my department. Please find enclosed the following:

Use of magic license

Apparation license

Driver's license

Best wishes in your endeavors.

Malfalda Hopkirk

Harry looked at the other papers and handed them to his Aunt. A small smile found its way to her face, and she handed the papers to Tonks. It had been countersigned by Rufus Scrimgeour, Minister of Magic.

“Good on you, Harry,” she said as she wrapped him in a hug. Remus waited until Tonks had let go of him and shook his hand.

“Let’s go put your stuff away Harry,” said Tonks. She placed all of the miniature bags on the little bed, waved her wand and it became piled high with shopping bags, each filled with things that Harry needed.

She opened Harry’s little closet, and the smile left her face. “Harry, I always thought you were trying to make a fashion statement with the grunge look. Is this what you were given to wear every day?”

Harry looked down at his feet and nodded. He desperately wished that Mrs. Weasley or someone had taken him shopping years ago. She called down the stairs, “Remus, can you come up here, please?”

Remus walked in the room, looked around and was saddened by the open closet and drawers that she was pointing to.

In a less than happy tone, Tonks asked, “How long has the Order been keeping an eye on Harry?”

Remus replied, “Most of Harry’s life. Why?”

She smacked him on the back of the head. “Why? Cor Remus. He probably wasn’t ever given decent clothing to wear. He was skinny as

a rail last summer when I met him. His Aunt apparently saw fit to meet only his most basic needs. Do you suppose he took a lot of pleasure in walking around in taped up trainers?"

She was just getting going. "Harry's about the nicest bloke that I've met and yet no one bothered to tell Dumbledore that the kid needed more to eat and better clothing to wear. How about a bicycle or a football? All these people were supposedly watching him, but who took the time to see what was happening."

Remus knew better than to say anything. The spirited Auror had far too much in common with Ginny Weasley to argue with. Besides he agreed with everything that she said. He'd seen Harry's shabby clothing four years ago when he'd been at Hogwarts, and just mentally passed over the possibility that no one was taking care of Harry.

"I..."

She turned to him and said, "Harry, this isn't your fault. I'm not even blaming your Aunt. She probably wasn't too pleased with the arrangements that weren't made properly. You're the most famous wizard of our age, and no one at the Ministry bothered to check in with you and see how you're doing. I'm sorry Harry. A lot of people let you down. I don't intend to be one of them."

She started tossing his greying underpants, threadbare socks, impossibly large tee shirts, and the rest of Harry's old clothing in a pile. Handing him a pair of new black jeans, flannel boxers, socks, a colorful shirt and his new boots she said, "Harry, take these into the loo and get changed." She kept emptying the rest of his drawers as if on a mission.

Five minutes later, a new and improved Harry emerged. Tonks took a look at him and smiled. "Hand me your old stuff, Harry," she said in her Auror command voice. Harry complied. A wave of her wand, and a childhood full of bad fashion vanished before his eyes.

Harry could only manage a big grin and said, "Thanks."

Remus and Tonks had helped put his new things away. From time to time, Tonks would hold a shirt or trousers up to Harry and wink suggestively, saying "Ginny will like these." When she was done, she smacked Remus on the back of the head again and said, "We're going through your closet next, lover."

As Harry started laughing, he heard Petunia say, "Harry, someone else is here to see you."

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"Crucio!"

The helpless Death Eater wished that he'd never been near the Dark Lord that morning when he was told to go keep an eye on Gringotts Bank. While Harry was out shopping, Borgin had been led out of the bank, flanked by a dozen Aurors.

As Marcus Flint writhed on the floor, hoping to lose consciousness, he wondered what insanity had caused him to believe Malfoy's promises of power and riches.

As Riddle kicked Flint's unconscious body out of the room, he hoped that he'd only taken a hundred thousand Galleon hit today. As insurance, he told Lestrangle to go pick up Borgin's wife.

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Wand drawn, Harry walked down the stairs to see Alastor Moody standing in the living room. Petunia was obviously quite frightened of the man and went into the kitchen to prepare dinner.

Glad that Harry had his wand out, Moody said, "Good work at Gringotts today, Potter."

Wand still out Harry replied, "Constant vigilance," with a hint of a smile on his face. "Where did you tell me never to stick my wand?"

A smile crept onto Moody's face as he replied, "I may have mentioned something about losing a buttock a year or so ago. Glad to

hear that you remembered. Good thing that you asked too. You never can be too careful.”

Harry nodded in agreement as he put his wand away.

Sensing that they were quickly wearing out their welcome, Tonks said, “Let’s go get something to eat. Harry, what would you like?”

Harry replied, “Pizza would be great. We never get it at school. I’ll be right back.” He ran upstairs to put his money sack back into his trunk, grabbed a few banknotes, locked his trunk and returned.

Not wanting to put Harry’s Apparation skills to the test quite yet, she made a portkey. Moments later, they were outside a family pizza restaurant near Brighton. Looking around for a moment, she was convinced that everyone nearby were muggles on holiday or locals. They went in and ordered.

After the server had taken their order, Tonks said, “Remus and I are going to walk around for fifteen or twenty minutes. You two visit for a while. Save us a few pieces, OK?”

Moody nodded. After they left, Moody waved his wand arm and put up a silencing charm around the booth.

Noticing his action, Harry asked, “What did you want to talk with me about Moody?”

Not one to mince words, Moody got to the point. “I wanted to talk with you about joining the Order Harry.”

Last summer Harry would have done anything to join the Order. Now he wasn’t sure that he’d trust them to guard Hedwig, but was polite enough to at least hear Moody out. Harry replied, “Go on.”

Moody said, “It was Dumbledore’s wish that you and the witches and wizards who went with you last year be invited to join the Order this summer. What do you think?”

Harry replied, "My experience with the Order hasn't been too great. One member betrayed my parents, one murdered the professor and another stole my stuff and was caught selling it."

Moody suppressed a laugh. He really liked this young man. "Point taken Potter. Who do you trust?"

Harry thought for a moment and said, "I trust five students from school, Hermione's parents, the Weasleys except for Percy, McGonagall, Flitwick, Hagrid, you, Tonks, Remus, Shacklebolt, Madam Pomfrey, Dobby and to a lesser degree, some of the students who were in the DA and the Gringotts Goblins. That's about it."

Moody nodded, considering what Harry had said. The young man had excluded over half of the staff at Hogwarts, a good part of the Order, and most of the Ministry. Moody smiled, certain in the knowledge that Potter would be drinking out of a hip flask before the war was over.

He replied, "I'm pleased to be a part of your short list, Potter. A man like you needs a short list. Dumbledore always wanted to see the best in people. That's a good attribute for a school master. That kind of attitude would get an Auror killed sooner or later."

Harry nodded. He looked over and saw Tonks and Remus chatting with the server. Moody noticed, and removed the silencing charm. A moment later, the server brought over two large pizzas and four more glasses of Harps. They thanked her, and she walked off to look in on the other customers. Moody recast the charm, and asked, "What were you and Dumbledore working on?"

Harry hesitated before answering. Dumbledore had told him to tell no one about the Horcruxes besides Ron and Hermione. He had even refused to tell McGonagall. But he knew he needed help with this. He decided to trust Moody too. He proceeded to give a detailed version of the creation of the Horcruxes, what he knew of them and what objects he guessed them to be.

Moody asked, "Who knows about this?"

Harry replied, "On our side, the four of us, Ron and Hermione, and possibly Professor Slughorn."

Moody asked, "Who needs to know?" Dumbledore had obviously kept it a close secret.

Harry replied, "I know what they are, but I don't know how they work. I was going to ask Professor Flitwick."

Moody replied, "You can ask, but they're far too dark for him to have ever spent time with. I know a guy in the Department of Mysteries who owes me a few favors. I'll talk with him tomorrow. What were your plans?"

Harry said, "I need to find and destroy the Horcrux pieces before Riddle finds me. In my spare time I need to train up to the point where I have a chance to go against him."

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Lestrangle saw the smoke rising from the burning home. The Aurors had given the home a quick search, and filled one trunk with valuables and personal items such as photos. They filled another trunk with obviously dark items. Fifteen minutes after arresting Borgin's wife, they torched the home.

After seeing how long he held Flint under the Cruciatus curse, she was not looking forward to reporting back to the Dark Lord.

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As Harry and Remus gobbled up the pizza, Moody continued, "So you destroyed the first one four years ago, and Dumbledore somehow destroyed one nine months ago. Did he ever say how he did it?"

Shoveling another slice of pepperoni down, Harry replied, "No. He told me that it would be an interesting tale to hear, but he never told me."

Moody said, "Tonks will take you to Hogwarts Saturday evening at eight to meet with the rest of the Order. You can decide what you want to do, and let me know before the meeting."

Harry nodded, and Moody said, "Potter, you're the only one here who thought to bring any muggle money. I guess that means that you can pick up the check."

Harry laughed. In their time together, Dumbledore had told him of his friend's extreme reluctance to ever pick up a check. He said, "I'll get it. Thanks for the advice. I'll see you Saturday evening."

When they got back to Privet Drive, Tonks said, "We'll be by Saturday morning at 8:45. Goodnight Harry."

As he drifted off to sleep, Harry realized that it would be an eventful summer.

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A/Ns

So what did happen to Dumbledore's hand?

Chapter 4

On Saturday morning, Harry woke up early, showered and thought about the last few days. He was hoping that he would hear from Hermione and her parents. He was hoping to hear from Ginny. What he hadn't hoped for arrived at 6:30 AM.

Harry paid the owl, carefully untied the newspaper and read the headline.

Harry Potter Foils Dark Side at Gringotts

Harry Potter, "The Chosen One" made the news again yesterday afternoon after he foiled a large transfer of gold from one of the Dark Lord's major supporters. Thomas Borgin 51 and his wife Claire were both arrested on various charges ranging from accessory to the murder of Wizengamot Head Albus Dumbledore to illegal funds transfer.

Minister of Magic Rufus Scrimgeour was on the scene shortly after the arrest. He told the Daily Prophet, "Mr. Potter was instrumental in identifying Thomas Borgin who had entered into the bank wearing a disguise. The Wizarding world owes yet another debt to Mr. Potter for his quick thinking."

While not specifying the exact amount of gold that was confiscated, an unnamed ministry source said the amount recovered was "Significant."

Harry glanced further down the page and saw a small article that interested him.

Mysterious Fires Destroy Wizarding Homes

Ministry spokesmen Percy Weasley confirmed that fires had been reported at several wizarding homes yesterday. Weasley speculated that the fires may have begun due to faulty cauldrons. Weasley said that a Ministry investigation several years ago found that several hundred substandard cauldrons had been illegally imported into the

country. "The thin bottom cauldrons could have easily leaked and started a fire or explosion."

Law Enforcement Director Hammer cited Weasley's example of checking his own bottom on a regular basis as being in character with the man that he is.

Having read enough, Harry wrote Ginny a quick note letting her know that he was fine and would try and come for a visit Sunday afternoon. Harry attached the note to Hedwig and sent his beautiful owl on her way.

Harry went down stairs to find his Aunt sitting alone at the kitchen table staring at her cup of tea. Seeing Harry come down, she got up, poured him a cup, handed it to him and in a low voice asked, "Are the Death Eaters responsible for all of the improbable accidents that I've seen on the beeb lately?"

Harry nodded his head and said, "Most of them, I reckon. Sometimes stuff just happens on it's own."

Petunia nodded and asked, "That man from your school, Dumbledore. He was killed last week?"

Again Harry nodded.

Petunia hesitated for a moment and asked, "Were you there when it... when he was murdered?"

Harry nodded, not really knowing what she wanted to hear.

Petunia looked sadder than ever and said, "I'm sorry. He seemed like a decent man."

Harry replied, "I suppose he had his faults like everyone, but he always tried to do the right thing."

Petunia asked, "You're wrapped up in all of this somehow, aren't you?"

Harry nodded and replied, "Before I was born, it was prophesized that a boy would be born who could defeat Voldemort. It turned out to be me. That's why he killed my parents, to kill me first."

Petunia considered his words for a moment and asked, "Can you really do it?"

Harry replied, "I hope so. He killed your parents, your sister, my Dad, Dad's parents and a lot of other good people since then. The professor helped me find a way to finish him off, and a lot of people are trying to help me."

"Will he come here for...?" Petunia didn't finish.

Harry said, "Probably. Would you and Uncle Vernon move to the States if I was able to help finance it?"

Petunia realized that the young man sitting across the table had the means to save their lives. She realized that her family would be wiped out if she didn't take action. Petunia replied, "I'll talk to Vernon tonight. When would we need to leave?"

"Dumbledore told me that the protection that Mum invoked would end on my seventeenth birthday. That leaves a bit more than a month."

Petunia gave a small smile and said, "He won't be happy about this."

Harry said, "I'd rather that the three of you be angry with me for the next fifty years safe in Boston than..."

Petunia nodded, and said, "I understand. Thank you, Harry." Refilling his cup, she asked, "Will you be having many visitors this next week?"

Harry said, "A fair number. I need to go into London this morning. I expect to be back after lunch. I hope to go visit Ginny later this afternoon."

There was a knock on the back door. Petunia looked out, but didn't see anyone. Harry got up and looked out. Professor Flitwick was at

the door. Harry held the door open and said, "Good morning, Professor. Please come in. Can I get you some tea?"

The diminutive wizard walked into the kitchen and said, "Good morning to you, Mr. Potter. Thank you. I'd love a cup."

Harry got a cup, while Flitwick sat at one of the chairs. Harry said, "Professor, this is my Aunt, Petunia Dursley."

Flitwick held out his hand, "Filius Flitwick. I'm pleased to meet you."

Petunia put on her bravest face and held out her hand. She said, "Are you here to help Harry..."

Flitwick said, "Yes. As much as I can, as will a lot of people. Harry, if you have an hour, I'd like to take you to your London home and transfer the wards to you."

Harry nodded, and said, "I can go now if it is convenient."

Flitwick finished his tea, thanked Petunia and they left out the back door. Flitwick asked, "How are you coming on your apparition, Harry?"

Harry replied, "I was given a license yesterday without even testing. I did OK in the practice sessions at school."

Flitwick said, "I'm certain that you did. You can do anything that you put your mind to. Can you picture the alley behind the building?"

Harry nodded, and Flitwick said, "Then place yourself there." Harry focused, and a few seconds later disappeared. He appeared with a tiny pop. A few seconds later, Flitwick was standing next to him, saying, "Very good. Let's walk over to the front door." He showed Harry a slip of paper that read, Harry Potter's house is at 12 Grimmauld Place. The door appeared between the two other buildings.

Flitwick handed Harry the key to the door and said, "You need to turn the lock, claim the home as your own and open the door."

Harry put the strange looking key into the keyhole, twisted the key, and said, "This home belongs to Harry James Potter." He felt a surge run through his arm. He walked into the darkened mansion.

Flitwick said, "Come to the hearth in the library. We need to transfer the wards as soon as possible." They walked through the dark hallways and into the library. The velvet curtains blocked out almost all of the light. Flitwick pointed his wand at the fireplace and a moment later, the fireplace gave off a merry light.

Harry asked, "What do I need to do?"

Flitwick said, "Place both hands on the mantle, Good. Think of the address here." Harry nodded, and Flitwick said "Fidelius." Harry felt another surge run through both arms.

Harry asked, "That's it?"

Flitwick nodded and said, "No one will be able to know of this place or see it from the outside unless you specifically give them permission. The fireplace is disconnected from the floo system. You can have it reattached if you wish. If you do, I'd recommend that you pay the extra fee and have it password protected."

Harry said, "Thank you, Professor."

Flitwick nodded and replied, "It was the least that I can do to help you Harry. What else do you need?"

Harry asked, "Professor, do you know what Professor Dumbledore was working on this last year?"

Flitwick said, "No. To be honest, I don't think he told anyone. A number of the staff wondered what he was doing when he was gone from the school, but I don't think anyone knew for sure."

Harry was pleased, thinking that there was less chance that Snape had found out. He continued, asking, "Professor do you know about Horcruxes?"

Flitwick thought for a moment and replied, "In general theoretical terms. Obviously I have no personal experience with them."

Harry said, "Professor, it would be of great help to me if you would look through the library and see if you can find any information on them. You mustn't tell anyone about the research that you're doing. No one must know. Can you do that?"

Flitwick asked, "What specifically are you trying to find out?"

Harry replied, "I need to know how to destroy one, whether the person that put a bit of themselves into one would know if one had been destroyed, and if that person would be physically weakened if their Horcrux had been destroyed."

An epiphany of thoughts came together for the little professor. He said, "I understand. I can give it almost my complete attention for the next month. I'll report back to you each week."

Harry said, "Thank you, Professor. Please don't go outside the castle looking for information. There are several pieces that have been hidden, and I can't risk them getting moved before I can locate them."

Flitwick asked, "When you say pieces, how many do you think there are?"

Harry replied, "I believe at one time there were six horcruxes. I destroyed one four years ago. The professor found one last summer. It may have been the reason that his hand had been injured. He said that he managed to destroy it, but he never told me how."

"Why don't you ask him?" asked Flitwick

Harry looked at the little professor confused at his words.

Flitwick smiled and replied, "His portrait woke up yesterday. I don't know when the essence image was made, but if it was recent enough he might be of some help."

Harry looked a bit confused, "Do you mean like a file backup on my cousin's computer? His painting would know what he knew as of a certain date?"

Flitwick replied, "I believe that you understand the basic theory. I don't know too much about them myself. I personally find them to be a bit annoying. I'm not certain if they know all of the details or are just the essence of that person's personality. I'm certain that it would tell you if it knew."

"Thank you, Professor."

"Harry, regardless of your other plans, I'll do some quiet research. Initially, I'll just look through the restricted section and the staff library to see what if anything is available. If I haven't heard from you in a week, I'll contact you. I recognize the importance of what you're trying to do, and I'll help you in any way that I can. Do you need me for anything else here today?"

"No. Thank you, Professor." Harry was truly grateful for the help.

Flitwick replied, "All right. Since, I helped you with the charm, I know about this building. You would need to have a slip of parchment that you could show to anyone else that you wanted to come here."

"I understand. Thanks again for your help. I really appreciate it."

"You're more than welcome, Mr. Potter. Enjoy your day. Remember to lock your house when you leave."

With that, the little wizard went out the back door and vanished.

As Harry was getting ready to leave, he wondered what he'd acquired with the mansion, and what had been stolen from him. He'd never really had anything growing up, and having people steal his things wasn't something that he was familiar with.

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An hour later, Tonks and Harry found themselves being shown into the office of Connie Hammer, Director of Magical Law Enforcement. Harry wasn't surprised to see Rufus Scrimgeour seated in one of the guest chairs. Seeing the look on Harry's face, Hammer cut him off, saying, "Harry, I'm told that you don't like publicity or extra attention, but sometimes it can't be helped. This wasn't the reason that I asked to speak with you today. Auror Tonks, for your part in the confiscation of over three million Galleons yesterday, you are awarded a cash reward of 50,000 Galleons."

Scrimgeour handed the speechless woman a Gringotts bank draft in her name. Her eyes welled with tears. That was equivalent to about ten years net salary for her as an entry level Auror. She stammered out a heartfelt "Thank you, Minister," and sat down again, light headed. This would brighten her future with Remus considerably.

Harry beamed at her and gave her a hug, saying, "Good on you, Tonks. I'm so happy for you. She kissed his cheek, and smiled before sitting down again.

A moment later, Scrimgeour handed Harry a rather heavy brushed aluminum case, and said, "Mr. Potter for your part in this, the Ministry awards you a cash reward of 100,000 Galleons."

Harry was stunned, stammering, "I, I just tried to do what was right."

Scrimgeour said, "I know son. You always have tried to do what was right. This time, the Ministry is in a position to say thank you in a different way." Getting up, he said, "I know that Director Hammer wants to talk with you both about some different issues. I'll take my leave now. Both of you enjoy your day. Perhaps we can visit sometime next week."

"Yes Minister. Thank you again," said Tonks.

"Thank you Minister," said Harry, still embarrassed.

Hammer had watched the two carefully as Scrimgeour had made the presentations. Clearly they knew each other better than she had been aware of. Harry was an enigma to her. Competent, but

embarrassingly shy, he'd walked into her office looking like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. The door opened, and an aid brought in a tray of tea and biscuits before turning around and closing the door again. Harry glanced up and noticed that it had been Percy Weasley.

She said, "Thank you for coming today, Mr. Potter. We really haven't been properly introduced before." She stood and held out her hand. "I'm Connie Hammer."

"Harry Potter," he said with a smile on his face. She noticed his disarmingly bright emerald eyes.

"Please call me Connie."

"Harry." Tonks smiled at the way Harry was warming up to her.

Hammer replied, "Thank you, Harry. I worked with Kingsley Shacklebolt for fifteen years, and Amelia for six years before that. I believed that Sirius Black was innocent, but we have no basis of doing much about it until Pettigrew is found, dead or alive."

She sipped her tea before continuing. She could sense Harry's comfort level rising. Putting down her cup she said, "Harry, picture yourself in my position for a moment. If you had my job right now today, what would you be working on?"

Surprised at her question, Harry smiled. He replied, "Thanks for asking. Also thanks for asking in private instead of having me be part of some press conference."

She smiled at him recognizing his sincerity.

Harry said, "I'd do five things." He thought for a moment and continued. "I'm not sure of the order, but I'll tell you the best that I can."

Hammer said, "Take your time."

Harry started, saying, "I'd personally visit with the parents of each student at Hogwarts, if only for five minutes each to let them know that you have their child's safety as one of the Ministry's highest priorities. If half of the kids are pulled out of school, it will be a real tragedy both for the school as well as their individual futures. Muggle parents aren't in a position to home school their kids."

Hammer nodded, taking notes. She said, "Go on."

"I'd compile a list of the known or suspected Death eaters and go after them. From what I've seen, everything that the Ministry has done has been reactive. Maybe you shouldn't go after Voldemort himself, but his Death Eaters are just witches and wizards hiding behind stupid white masks."

She smiled and said, "Go on." She wondered what he meant by shouldn't.

Harry continued. "I'd physically check every kid that goes to school. Expel and arrest any kid who shows up with the Mark branded on them."

"Go on."

"I think Galleons can be used as weapons just as easily as guns or wands. Lucius Malfoy was probably buying influence the whole time that Voldemort was gone. Go after their money."

Tonks noticed a beetle crawling on her robe. Instinctively she flicked it off her robe and squashed it with her foot. Taking out her wand, she vanished the squished bug and said, "Sorry Director. Harry, go on."

Harry suppressed a surprised look and said, "The home defense sheet that we were sent a year ago was a joke. Wooden houses aren't worth dying over. The Ministry should provide people with the means of getting away to safety if their homes are under attack from Death Eaters. Maybe Percy Weasley should be taught how to create and distribute emergency portkeys rather than make a career out of brown nosing whoever his boss happens to be."

Hammer was sipping her tea and choked on his last words, before letting out a wonderful laugh. Putting down her cup, she said, "Thank you for coming today, Harry. You're so refreshingly honest."

Sensing that she was genuine in her words, and that he wasn't being dismissed, Harry asked, "How many Death Eaters do you reckon that there are?"

Hammer replied, "Fewer than the wizarding public would imagine. Probably no more than a hundred."

Harry nodded and said, "I was there the night two years ago when Voldemort got his body back. The first thing that he did was touch his wand to the Dark Mark branded on Pettigrew's inner forearm. It called his Death Eaters to apparate to his location. About thirty-five witches and wizards showed up. They seem to run in families, the Crabbs, Goyles, the Malfoys."

"Notts, added Tonks. Harry's right. We can't win a war strictly by playing defense."

"I understand your points," said Hammer. "I believe that I'm correct when I say that Minister Scrimgeour will concur with all of your suggestions Harry. I also understand your desire to keep yourself out of every issue of the Daily Prophet and Teen Witch Weekly." Harry nodded. She continued, saying, "I would like to talk with you from time to time if you wouldn't mind?"

Harry replied, "I'd be happy to."

She stood up and said, "Thank you both for coming in. Auror Tonks if you have just a minute more, I'd like to have a few words."

"I'll wait outside", said Harry.

"Thanks again, Harry." Seeing him stand without it, she added, "Remember your case, Harry. You did earn it."

After Harry had left closing the door behind him, Hammer asked, "Auror Tonks, how well do you know Mr. Potter?"

Tonks replied, "I met him several years ago through a study group that Professor Dumbledore had led."

Hammer looked at Tonks a bit impatiently and said, "You're referring of course to his fabled Order of the Phoenix? The group was less of a secret that you might have imagined. Go on."

"Guarding Harry was one of the things that the group was involved in."

"There's nothing more to the...?"

Tonk's hair turned red. She replied, "No Director. Strictly Professional. I have a steady relationship with..."

Hammer said, "Mr. Remus Lupin. I know. We do keep an eye on our own as well. Auror Tonks, are you happy with your current assignment?"

"Acting as Harry's bodyguard? Yes Director, very much so." Actually, Tonks was surprised to be asked. Choosing assignments was virtually unheard of under Hammer.

"Good. Please continue with it through the month of August. Dismissed."

"Thank you Director. Thank you for everything."

Hammer smiled and replied, "You're welcome."

...---...---

"Your cooking is crap. I needed a decent meal."

"Draco, this was a bad idea. I told you not to burn the bangers."

After eating their lunch, and quibbling like two old bitties the entire time, they went to the cashier. "The barman said, "The bill comes to twenty-eight quid, Gov."

Malfoy took out the handful of coins that they'd stolen from the BP, handed the cashier two of the one-pound coins and said, "Keep the change."

The barman's tone changed instantly. He growled, "Change my arse, you little rodent. No one stiffs Thomas Kelly out of..." He never saw the jet of red light hit him in the side.

Malfoy went around the till, scooped all of the coins and the two ran out the door. Again as luck would have it, the pub had installed a surveillance camera. Minutes later the constable had been summoned. Replaying the video gave a rather clear photo of young Malfoy as he was scooping the one pound coins out of the till, again leaving the ten and twenty pound notes in the bill slots. The investigating officer wrote up his notes, and released a photo of the two to the local papers. The morning paper would carry the article about the Coin Collector Bandits' latest caper and publish the accompanying photographs.

... --- ... ---

Wormtail knew that he'd never sit comfortably again. Bellatrix had found him unconscious from blood loss on the kitchen the day before. More skilled at killing than healing, she administered the poorly made blood restorative potion. Hours later Pettigrew had woken up with a blinding headache from the poorly mixed potion.

As Malfoy was making a fool of himself at the pub, Pettigrew was summoned before the Dark Lord.

"What did you learn, Wormtail?"

"One of the Weasley sons are getting married on July 19th. They are having the wedding ceremony at their home at 5 PM. It might be a good opportunity to attack and show our strength."

Riddle nodded, his snakelike eyes flashing at the thought of dealing a crippling blow to one of Dumbledore's closest supporters.

Noticing his stiff movement, Riddle asked, "Good work, Wormtail. How were you injured?"

Pettigrew replied, "I was attacked while in my rat form, Master."

"I suppose it is a risk, but in this case, it was worth it. Rest a bit then check in on Snape and Draco. Bring them back to me when you find them."

Pettigrew bowed and left the room.

Riddle called, "Bella, summon Stephen Bulstrode to me."

... --- ... ---

Harry and Tonks returned to Privet Drive after leaving Director Hammer's office. After Harry was safely inside, Tonks said, "Harry, I need to go see Remus for a few minutes. I'll be back early this afternoon."

Harry smiled, knowing that she would want to share her good news with her lover. He replied, "Say 'Hi' from me. Thanks for coming with me today. I'll be at Ginny's later in the afternoon."

Minutes after the excited Auror had left, there was a knock on the door. Harry opened the door to find Professor McGonagall standing there. He greeted her, "Please come in, Professor."

"Good morning, Mr. Potter. I understand that you've had a busy summer already." A wry smile crept onto her face. Harry let out an all too rare laugh and McGonagall felt joy to see the slight twinkle in his emerald eyes.

Handing his favorite professor a cup of tea, Harry replied, "Trouble just seems to find me. How can I help you Professor?"

McGonagall said, "We have several things to talk about. First, I'm hoping that you will consider coming back to school in the fall, even if on a part time basis. I recognize that career counseling in the normal sense isn't needed in your case, and I recognize that you have things

that you'll need to do that will take you away from the castle from time to time. I'm trying to say that I'd like it if you would attend and I'll do everything that you need to accommodate your unique situation."

Harry said, "I can't commit yet, but I truly appreciate your offer and I hope to be able to attend if I can."

McGonagall nodded. She had received a similar answer from the Grangers, but knew that far more students would attend if they knew that Potter was attending. She let the subject drop for the moment and continued. "Professor Dumbledore left you most of his personal possessions including a number of priceless books and his pensive. I'm told that the sword that you found in your second year already belongs to you. I could have them stored for you or..."

Harry replied, "I'd be happy to come by and collect them. Also Professor, I was wondering if it would be possible for me to come by and talk with the painting a bit. We had some unfinished business, and I could use the professor's advice."

"Right. You are welcome to come by anytime. I will notify Mr. Filch."

"Thank you Professor." Harry was fairly certain that McGonagall hadn't yet gotten to the real reason for her visit, and waited for her to come around to the topic.

Putting down her teacup, she said, "Potter, the other reason that I came by was to invite you to join the Order of the Phoenix."

Harry had been expecting this after conversing with Moody. He replied, "Professor, stating it a bit differently, I'd like the Order to join me, or at least most of the Order. I guess I'd like everyone to try out for their spot again. As I told Moody earlier, the Order hasn't been too good to me. Members have betrayed my parents, stolen from me and murdered the Professor. There are some of the other students that I'd like to have join as well."

"I see," said McGonagall somewhat surprised, but quite pleased that Harry had put so much thought into this. She didn't mention having already spoken to the other five students. She asked, "What else?"

Harry asked, "How effective would you say that the Order would be as a fighting unit?" He knew the question might come off as insulting, but didn't know a better way to ask.

McGonagall was at least honest in her evaluation and after a half minute answered, "Not very,...But that hasn't been the primary focus of the group."

"I understand, Professor, but times have changed."

"Yes. Unfortunately they have." She recognized the absolute truth in his words.

"What time is the meeting?"

"Eight PM tonight at the castle. Here is a portkey. It will be in my classroom. Actually, please come at nine instead. Is that acceptable?"

"I'll see you then." He shook her hand.

She rose to leave. "Thank you for the tea, Harry."

"You're welcome Professor. Thanks for coming by."

McGonagall got up, walked out the back door and vanished. After she left Harry found his aunt and asked, "Are there any chores that you need help with today?"

Petunia thought for a moment, and replied, "None that can't wait until next week. It sounds like you have a busy day. Will you be home for dinner?"

Harry said, "No. I'll probably be home late."

Petunia thought for a moment and replied, "Here's the key to the back door. Please come in as quietly as you can."

Harry replied, "I will. Thanks."

Fifteen minutes later Harry was standing in the back yard. He had a shrunken bag containing his burgundy robes in his pocket. He focused on the spot by one of the Weasley out buildings where Dumbledore had apparated him to last summer. With a tiny pop, he reappeared. He started walking towards the house. Moments later a red headed fireball ran up and wrapped herself around him. Harry felt himself holding 105 pounds of a very lively young woman. "Hi Ginny. I've missed you too."

... --- ... ---

A/N

Thanks for all of the e-mails responding to my last few questions. I really enjoyed the perspective.

Has anyone read a story where the inferi were used?

Can the Aurors effectively transition from being a police department to being an tactical unit?

I recently read a shorter story that was well written from BenRG – The Rescue. It's a good read.

If anyone cares to recommend a post HBP story, please e-mail me.

Thanks.

O-C

Chapter 5

Saturday June 15 – Granger residence

As Ginny was greeting Harry with great enthusiasm, Bellatrix Lestrange apparated a quarter mile away from Dan and Emma's home. Walking with purpose, the evil witch walked up to their front door, drew her wand and knocked on the front door, intent on murdering whoever was unlucky enough to answer.

... --- ... ---

Meanwhile at the Burrow, Ginny held onto Harry as if for dear life. In all objectivity, Harry was doing the same. Running her hand on the outside of his shirt, she sent shivers down his spine in spite of the warm weather.

After several minutes of nonverbal communication, Ginny smiled and innocently asked, "Harry, are you all right? The paper said that you got into a fight with a Death Eater at Gringotts." She was smothering him with kisses and other messages to the extent that Harry could barely comprehend her words.

"It wasn't anything, Ginny. It was over in a few seconds. I just recognized Mr. Borgin in the lobby at Gringotts, took out my wand and stunned him before he could get away. Everyone's making a big deal out of it."

As Ginny was leading Harry into the home, he was nearly smothered by Mrs. Weasley, who, several inches shorter than him now, clung onto Harry like he was a lost child saved from death (which was exactly how she felt about him). She took his bag and his case, set them down at the table, and said, "Harry, you looked starved, let me get you something to eat. How could you find yourself in such danger after only a few minutes in Diagon Alley?"

Smiling indulgently, Harry replied, "Mrs. Weasley, it's great to see you too. Hi Ron."

Molly said, "Ron, go put Harry's things away in Percy's old room. Harry, sit down, sit down."

Harry dutifully sat down at the table while Ron picked up the duffle bag that Harry brought and the brushed aluminum case that Scrimgeour had given him.

Harry had taken the feather-light charm off of the case and was about to mention to Ron to be careful when the teen yelped, "Bloody hell Harry, what've you got in here?"

Molly was on the lanky teen in an instant, "Watch your language Ron. You've no right to ask Harry what he's carrying."

Harry recharmed the case, and said, "Sorry mate. I forgot that it was a bit heavy. I'll get it."

"You sit there and finish eating dear," said Molly, looking daggers at her son. "Ron will bring your things up and think about his language before he comes back down."

"Yes, mum," replied Ron, knowing that arguing was fruitless.

As Molly was trying to talk Harry into a third piece of fruit pie, Ron came back down. Seizing the opportunity, Harry said, "I can't take another bite, Mrs. Weasley, but Ron looks like he could use a piece. Everything was delicious. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome dear," replied, Molly, begrudgingly giving the last piece to Ron.

"Have you heard from Hermione," asked Harry?

... --- ... ---

As Harry was being greeted by Molly, Dan and Emma were returning home. Dan had just turned onto their street in their grey BMW with Hermione riding in the back. They had been out shopping and were coming home after a late lunch. As luck was with them, Hermione happened to be looking out of the window of the car and saw the thin witch knocking at their front door. Recognizing Lestrangle Hermione

said in a surprisingly steady voice, "Keep going Dad. Don't stop, whatever you do."

Fractions of a second from braking and turning into their driveway, Dan made a lifesaving decision and took his daughter at her word. Bellatrix never noticed the car as it drove by. A minute later, she gave up and apparated away.

Turning around to see her daughter taking calming breaths as they sped away, Emma asked, "What's wrong dear? Who was that woman?"

Hands shaking, Hermione replied, "That was the witch who murdered Harry's godfather, Bellatrix Lestrange." She knew that it was unlikely that she would ever live in her parent's home again. "We need to go find Harry."

... --- ...

During the first war, Riddle had divided his war chest into three pieces; each at one time had about a million Galleons. The largest, wisely invested over the years by Lucius, had grown considerably over the years but was currently unavailable to him due to Malfoy's imprisonment. Malfoy initially had used much of the gold to buy influence and eventually skimmed back hundreds of thousands of Galleons of Ministry funds in his crooked dealings with Fudge. At the time of his imprisonment, it was nearly two million galleons.

Borgin had used his to expand his shop. He had done well over the years trading in grey artifacts, but had maintained an inconspicuous personal profile over the years unlike Malfoy. Borgin had never taken the Mark. In spite of that, Riddle had placed a degree of trust in his former employer, and up until recently, Borgin had lived a comfortable life on the edge of wizarding society. Prior to his arrest, Borgin had never been asked to tap into the fund.

Stephen Bulstrode hadn't done as well as either Malfoy or Borgin. He'd been arrested as a Death Eater after the first war, but released after five years, largely due to Malfoy's efforts. At the time of Voldemort's rebirth, Bulstrode's careful stewardship of the account

had brought its balance to slightly over two million Galleons. Since then Bulstrode had been asked to tap into the account a dozen times since to finance Riddle's efforts. The unsuccessful defense of the Death Eaters caught at the Ministry had taken two hundred thousand Galleons. Riddle repaid the unsuccessful solicitors back by having their families tortured and murdered before their eyes.

Bulstrode wasn't surprised to receive another summons to appear before Riddle. The sandy haired man and his pug-faced wife ran a polyjuice prostitution business. Muggle clients paid them large amounts of money, believing they were acquiring the services of super models. In fact most of the toothless witches that they employed had seen the Great War, and had rather enjoyed the ruse.

As Bulstrode was handed the portkey from Pettigrew, there was no doubt in his mind what he would be asked to do. Bulstrode only questions were the requested amount, currency and the timing.

... --- ...

Lestrangle was in a foul mood. Unsuccessful in her attempts to find Potter or his friends, she refused to settle for the knowledge that they would have another opportunity at the wedding. She decided to recruit some additional followers and launch another attack on the mudblood witch in a day or two.

... --- ...

Harry was finishing lunch when the cellular telephone that Dr. Granger had given him rang. He picked it up and answered, "Hello?"

Hermione was on the other end. "Harry, do you have someplace that my parents and I could stay?"

Harry replied, "Of course. What's wrong?"

"Bellatrix was at our front door as we were coming back from lunch." Her voice was calmer than Harry would have imagined.

Harry asked, "Where are you?"

“We’re in the parking lot at the Tesco store by our house.”

Harry asked, “Is there anything that you absolutely need from your house? I’ll call Director Hammer and ask her to have some Aurors meet you at your parents’ house to pick up what you need. My home is at number twelve Grimmauld place. Do you remember where it is?”

Having been told, Hermione remembered that Harry had inherited the mansion from Sirius and knew how to get there. She replied, “I remember.”

Harry said, “Can you wait a half hour before going back? The Aurors will probably want to check the house for jinxes or curses first. I’ll call you after I talk with Hammer.”

“OK. Thanks.”

“No worries. I’ll take care of you.”

“I know. Thanks Harry. Bye.”

Harry called Director Hammer. She would have a team of Aurors there in ten minutes. Harry called Hermione back. The entire time he was on the phone, Ron, Molly, and Ginny were sitting at the table gawking at him. Ron had only used a telephone once, and had never even seen a cellular telephone before. Molly and Ginny were equally amazed. They held Arthur’s fascination with muggle technology with a bit higher esteem after Harry’s demonstration of instant communication.

Molly asked, “What can we do to help?”

Harry replied, “They’re going back to their house to pick up some stuff, then they’re going to stay at my house. They’ll be there in a few hours. I need to go to the Ministry and Diagon Alley for a few minutes.”

Molly replied, “We’ll go with you, dear. It’s not safe to go alone.”

Harry knew it was a losing battle to argue. They took the floo to the Ministry visitor entrance. Ten minutes and two hundred galleons later, Harry had a passworded floo access to his home. As they were walking back up to the visitor lobby, Harry had an idea and asked, "Mrs. Weasley is there a shop in Diagon alley that sells Wizing cameras?"

Molly replied, "Of course, dear. Sally's Ocular is right next to the twins' shop. What do you need?"

Harry said, "I'd like to get a wizing camera, and some film for it."

Five minutes later Harry had a high quality camera that easily fit in his pocket and film for several hundred photos. He also bought four more cases like the one that Scrimgeour had given him.

They went back to the Burrow and then to Grimmauld Place to wait for the Grangers. As Harry was unlocking the back door, he wished that Dobby was available to help him. Much to his surprise the little elf appeared five minutes later accompanied by Winky. Each was carrying a small bag. Dobby ran to Harry and said, "Harry Potter sir, Dobby and Winky are honored to enter into your service sir. Dobby has been hoping for years that Harry Potter would ask Dobby to serve him. Thank you sir."

Embarrassed at the little elf's display of affection, Harry replied, "OK Dobby. You and Winky can work for me and stay with me as long as you like. We'll talk about the arrangements later. Can you help get this place ready for people to live in again?"

"Oh yes Harry Potter sir. We's will do a good job. What did you wants?"

Harry explained what he had in mind. As he did, the two elves listened carefully. Harry gave Winky the sack of galleons that he'd gotten that day at Gringotts and told them to let him know when they needed more.

As Winky went to the market to buy groceries and paint, Dobby went to work like an elf possessed. When Winky returned twenty minutes

later, Dobby already had the peeling wall coverings removed from the second floor where most of the bedrooms were.

Molly, Ginny and Ron went back to the Burrow to get some things to help Harry with his house. Seizing the opportunity, Harry divided up the gold that Scrimgeour gave him into five piles and refilled each of the five cases. After he closed and labeled the cases, he met with Dobby and Winky. She wanted to be bonded to Harry whereas Dobby wanted to remain a free elf and work for him.

Harry replied, "I'll agree to both of your terms, but I have a few of my own. Dobby you must accept double the pay that you were getting at the castle, you both must take a day off each week, and you must take one of the rooms in the house as your own. If you'd rather each have your own room, that's fine too. The only other thing that I request is that you keep my secrets and wear good clothing. Is that agreeable?"

Looking up at him with her big eyes, the tiny elf squeaked, "Yes, Harry Potter, sir."

Dobby nodded solemnly and replied, "Oh, yes, Harry Potter, sir."

The elves went back to painting the rooms. Fortunately the weather was warm and sunny allowing them to pry the windows open. The paint dried quickly. A few minutes later, Harry heard a knock at the back door. Dobby beat Harry to the door and answered it.

The Grangers had arrived, having filled up two cars with their possessions. Hermione was nearly as shocked as Dan and Emma to see the two little elves scurrying around the home.

Seeing the look on Hermione's face, Harry said, "I'll explain later. Pick out any rooms that you like."

"Where is your room, dear?" asked Emma.

"I don't know," replied Harry. He had never really picked one out.

Dobby replied, "Harry Potter sir's room is on the third floor. The other bedrooms are on the second floor. May I show you sir, madam and miss?"

Dan and Emma followed the little elf as he bounced up the stairs in excitement. Hermione looked at Harry and he said, "They just showed up. "I'm paying Dobby as much as Dumbledore paid them together. I gave them their own room and a day a week off. Winky insisted on being bonded rather than being employed. Are you OK with that?"

Hermione frowned for a moment, and replied, "They seem very happy. What about Kreacher?"

"Dobby told me that he'd died during the school year."

"Oh," replied Hermione. She had a hard time feeling too sorry for him.

... --- ...

As the Grangers were settling in, Winky began getting dinner together. They were eating earlier than usual, as Harry wanted to go to the castle early.

Hermione asked, "How come?"

Harry replied, "The professor had left me some things and I wanted to look through them for a bit."

Dan said, "Harry I noticed that the house doesn't have electrical service. I did some dental work for an electrician and his family, and he owes me a pretty big favor. If you'd like, I would be happy to have him wire electrical service to your house."

Harry replied, "That would be great. Thank you. I'll leave some money out to cover the costs. How much do you think it would cost?"

Dan replied, "He'll do the work for free. The wiring and outlets themselves won't be too expensive. If you want, Emma could pick out some ceiling lights for you."

Harry said, "Please. Thank you. I never did like the gas lights here." Actually he never liked anything about the house, but had to admit that even in the few hours that Dobby and Winky had been working on it, there had been substantial improvements.

Dan said, "I'll make the arrangements. I'm fairly certain that he'll be here on Monday."

After Dan had called the electrician, Harry talked with him briefly and gave him the address.

... --- ...

After dinner, Hermione asked her mum if she could leave early with Harry to go to the castle.

Emma replied, "Of course, dear. How will you be getting there?"

Harry said, "I had the fireplace hooked up to the floo network. We could use it or we could apparate. Hermione, do you have a preference?"

She said, "We might as well get some more practice apparating."

Harry replied, "OK. I'll be ready in ten minutes. We might as well wear our robes."

Hermione was surprised that she was ready before Harry. He came down carrying what looked like a shrunken brass trunk. She asked, "What's that for?"

Harry, replied, "I'll be bringing some books and stuff back. It's a three-compartment trunk. We should go now. Will your mum and dad be OK?"

Emma replied, "We'll be fine here. Will you be late?"

Harry said, "We'll most likely be back by midnight."

Dan said, "Be careful." Moments later he watched in amazement as Harry and his daughter vanished before his eyes.

... --- ...

Filch had a scowl on his face as he let them in. "Mind ya, Don't make a mess of things as you troop around the place." He had lost his one friend in the castle, and with Snape gone had decided to retire at the end of the month.

On the way to the Headmistress' office, they met Professor Flitwick. Pleased to see them, he said, "Good evening, Miss Granger and Mr. Potter. I'm glad to see that you've taken my advice. The password is Fawkes."

The gargoyle stood aside and they stood on the moving spiral staircase. It spun around once as it lifted then to the oaken doorway. McGonagall had left the Griffin door knocker on the door. Harry knocked and McGonagall replied, "Come in."

The office had barely changed since Harry had last been in it, as if McGonagall was hesitant to put her own scratch on the job. She stood up, shook both of their hands in a friendly manner and offered them tea.

"Thank you, Professor," replied Hermione.

They had about an hour until the Order meeting was to begin. Harry had been invited to come an hour later than the rest. McGonagall pointed to the wall and the open room behind the door, and said, "All of Albus' things that were in the castle were left to you, Harry. He also had a box that had your name on it. If there are things that you do not wish to have, place them in the trunk over there. I see that you brought a trunk for the things that you want to keep. You doubtless recognize that many of the books that he left you are irreplaceable. Please be careful with them."

"Yes Professor."

“He also left you his pensive and quite a few memories. I hope they serve you well. I have to meet with the house elves now. I’ll leave you be. Hermione, you are invited to the meeting at eight, in my classroom. Harry, please come at nine.”

After she left, Hermione said, “I’ll start in his apartment.”

Harry nodded, “Thanks.” He carefully placed the different stacks of books into the trunk, but left the pensive out. He looked at the sword that had found him in the chamber of secrets, and carefully placed it in the trunk.

Hermione called out, “Harry, what size shoes do you wear?”

Harry replied, “Ten, why?”

She answered, “There are several pair of really wonderful dragonhide boots in here that you might like.”

As they sorted through the collection of ordinary and unusual personal items, Harry found an American .45 pistol and Dumbledore’s Order of Merlin – First Class medal. They looked at it together for a moment before putting it in the trunk with the other things. Hermione looked at Harry and said, “You’ll be able to hang yours next to it someday.”

Harry didn’t say anything. Dumbledore had received it in 1945 for defeating the Dark Lord of the day, Grindelwald. Harry hoped that his wouldn’t be given out posthumously.

After a while, Harry said to Hermione, “I don’t really need all of this stuff. Are there things that you’d like?”

Hermione said, “Thanks Harry. I’d really like this Arithmancy book and one of these photos. Maybe the members of the Order would each like something as a memento. Why don’t you finish packing up what you’d like and you can call them up after the meeting?”

Harry nodded, hoping that he’d find what he was looking for.

A moment later Hermione said, "I should go now. Why are you coming an hour later?"

"Dunno," replied Harry.

As she opened the door to leave, she noticed Dumbledore's painting, regretted that he was sleeping again and said, "I'll see you soon."

As soon as Hermione left, Harry headed for the pensive. Tapping it with his wand, he soon found the memory that he was looking for and stuck his head into the bowl. It was the memory that Auror Bob Ogden had from the day that he visited the Gaunts. Harry pulled out his camera and hoped that his idea would work. When he saw the locket that Riddle's future mother Merope wore, he took a photograph of it. He also took a photo of the ring before leaving the memory. Tapping the wand again, he found the memory of young Riddle being shown Hufflepuff's goblet and took several photos of it.

Harry extracted two of his own memories and placed them in the bowl. He took several photos from each of them before leaving the pensive and replacing the memories. Following the instructions that he'd received from the camera store he took the film out, said the appropriate incantation and made two copies of each of the photos. He put one set in his trunk and put the other set in an envelope.

... --- ...

As Harry was reviewing the various memories, Moody had finished inducting Ron, Ginny, Neville, Luna and Hermione into the Order. He stood again, and said, "The next bit of business concerns Harry Potter. I'm placing two items up for a vote and discussion. The first is that he be nominated to join the group." He looked and saw the nods of the members both old and new and knew that that part of his plan would easily pass.

Continuing, he said, "The second item that I want to put to a vote is that Harry be elected leader of the Order."

There was a bit of murmuring, the Moody asked, "Is there a second to Harry's nomination to become a member?"

Minerva seconded, and everyone said "Aye."

Moody began, "We've all heard at least part of the Prophecy regarding Potter's role in facing off with Voldemort. Some of you might know it all. The short of it is that at one level or another it's Potters fight. We can do what we can to help, but it's his fight. Are there other comments before we put this to a vote?"

Molly stood and said, "I love Harry like a son, but he's just too young to lead a fight against He-who-must-Not-Be-Named."

Lupin stood and quietly asked, "If not Harry, who would you suggest Molly? I agree with Alastor. It's Harry's fight. He and Albus were working together all of last year. Who here has more experience directly fighting Voldemort? He sat down again. Quite a few people nodded in agreement.

Molly nudged Arthur, who shook his head and said, "No Molly. I agree with Remus. It is unfortunate that any of us have to be here tonight regardless of our age. I will follow Harry."

Minerva stood and said, "We received our instruction a week ago from Albus. If we help him as we were asked to, perhaps we can help end the war earlier, and save some lives. I will follow Harry."

Molly pleaded, "There has to be another alternative. He's too young to be thrown into this."

Tonks stood up and said, "Then face Voldemort yourself. He's done it a handful of times. None of us have even once. The only other person to face Voldemort off and live to talk about it was Dumbledore. Some of us here can't even say his name. I will follow Harry." Molly glared at the young Auror.

Hermione stood and said, "Before we vote, I want to say three things. First Harry is the bravest man that I've ever met. He was the one who faced down a forty-foot basilisk and Riddle to rescue Ginny when he

was twelve. Second, he is a great leader. All five of us are here tonight because of the skills that he helped us learn a year ago. Last, if we do vote him as head of the Order, we should expect to take a loyalty test. Harry doesn't trust many people." She took a breath and said, "I will follow Harry."

Moody stood and asked, "Are there any other comments?"

No one had anything new to say. Moody called for a vote. Of the twenty-three members there, twenty-one voted yes. Molly and Elphias abstained from voting. When the votes were counted and announced, Elphias Doge resigned his membership and left the group.

... --- ...

A few minutes after the Order had finished voting, Harry walked into the room. As he did, everyone stood and applauded him. Moody performed the initiation rite, and congratulated Harry. After doing so, he said, "Harry, before you came in we all voted, and would like you to be the leader of the Order. Will you accept our offer?"

Harry looked at Remus, Tonks, McGonagall, Hagrid, Bill, Ginny and some of the others. They all nodded at him. Harry stood and said, "I accept your invitation. I will do my best to keep everyone safe and end this war."

While Moody was talking, Hermione had created another of her charmed loyalty oath documents, signed it and gave it to Moody. The old Auror looked at it carefully, signed it and called Flitwick over. Flitwick looked at it, smiled and signed the document before passing it to Hagrid. Within a few minutes, everyone had signed it and Hermione gave the document to Harry. He looked at it, signed it and nodded.

Taking one of the butterbeers that were on a tray, Harry cast a silencing charm over the door and sealed it. He said, "The reason that Riddle didn't die the first time that he tried to kill me was because he had split his soul up into several pieces and encased them into

objects called Horcruxes. He held up several photographs and placed them on the table. Picking up the first one he said, "This is a photograph of Tom Riddle, the man who calls himself Lord Voldemort." Everyone looked in rapt amazement. Few had ever seen Voldemort, and no one had seen a photo of him. Harry drew the letters from the name Tom Marvolo Riddle with his wand and rearranged them to read, I am Lord Voldemort. "Riddle was an orphan like me. He began killing people when he was sixteen. After he began murdering people he began creating the Horcruxes."

Harry held up a photograph of Riddle's diary. "This was the first one that he made. It was an enchanted diary that he'd given to Lucius Malfoy for safekeeping. Riddle must have never told Malfoy exactly what it was, because Malfoy slipped it into one of Ginny Weasley's school books when she was eleven to cause her trouble."

Harry held up another photo and said, "This is a picture of the diary being destroyed. It gave off a blinding light when I pierced it with the basilisk fang. I never thought much about it at the time. I was too concerned about Ginny." There was absolute silence in the room as Harry was telling about the color photos. Molly had tears welled in her eyes.

"Here is a photo of Slytherin's ring that Riddle made into a Horcrux when he was about eighteen. That's Tom Riddle wearing it. Professor Dumbledore found it last year and destroyed it." No one made a sound. Dumbledore had never told any of them anything like what Harry was telling them.

Harry held up the next photo and said, "Here is a photo of Riddle's mum. She was abandoned by her husband and died giving birth to Riddle. Notice the locket that she was wearing." Harry held up the next photo. "Here is a better photo of the locket. It had originally belonged to Slytherin. Notice the letter S on the back of it."

Harry held up the next photo. "This is a photo of a cup that Helga Hufflepuff owned. Like the locket, Riddle put bits of his soul into it and made them into Horcruxes. We have no idea where this one is hidden away."

No one said a word. Harry half wondered if he'd placed a silencing charm on the entire group by mistake. He held up the last photo. "This is a picture of Riddle's snake Nagini. Riddle put a bit of his soul into her as well. Professor Dumbledore thought that Riddle had also created one more Horcrux while he was still a student, but we don't know what it might be." He placed the photos on the table so people could look at them later.

Minerva stood and asked the question that was on everyone's mind. "Harry, how on earth did you obtain these photos?"

Harry replied, "I used the pensive and went back into the memories. While I was in them I used my new camera. I made them while I was waiting to come here."

Moody asked, "Great idea, Potter. Whose memories were these?"

Harry replied, "One was from an old Auror before Riddle was born, one was from a professor when Riddle was sixteen and one was from a woman who had purchased the locket and the cup when Riddle was eighteen. The others are mine."

Minerva asked, "Harry is there anything else that you can tell us about the horcruxes?"

Harry said, "A bit. Some is based on guesswork. Some is based on what the Professor and I were able to learn this last year. Some is based on what the Professor was able to tell me about Riddle, or I've heard myself. Did you have specific questions?"

Moody asked, "Is there some kind of connection between the items?"

Harry replied, "In one of the professor's memories, he showed me that Riddle liked collecting souvenirs. We believed that both the locations and the objects themselves held significance to him."

Tonks asked, "Where did Professor Dumbledore find the ring?"

Harry said, "Riddle had hidden it at the remains of Gaunts' shack in Little Hangleton. Gaunt was Riddle's grandfather on his mother's side."

Arthur asked, "How was the ring destroyed?"

Harry replied, "I don't know. Does anyone?" No one answered.

Remus asked, "Harry, do you have any idea where the other objects are hidden?"

Harry answered, "The day Snape murdered the Professor, he and I had gone searching for the locket. We found where it had been hidden, by a place where the orphanage had taken Riddle and the other orphans on outings. It had been guarded by enchantments and infiri. Someone had found it before we did and replaced it with a fake locket."

"Do you have the fake locket?" asked Kingsley.

Harry pulled the locket out of his pocket, surprising himself that he was still keeping it. Kingsley looked at it and asked, "Does anyone remember someone with the initials R.A.B?"

No one could think of anyone with that name.

Hermione voiced a question that had been bothering her. "If this person stole the locket, and apparently knew what it was, why would they go to the trouble of replacing it with a fake?"

Again, no one could think of an answer.

Finally Bill asked the question that had been on their minds for the last hour. "Harry, what can we do to best help you?"

Harry replied, "I think we should group ourselves into three teams for a while. The first team should be made up of those who might be best at research and healing. There are things that we'll need to look up, spells to research, and information that we'll need."

He continued. "The second team will be primarily searching for the Horcrux pieces. They will work to try and figure out where they might be and how to get to them. This might be a dangerous task. We don't know how the professor hurt his hand."

Harry finished, saying, "The last team will primarily be a fighting unit. I want to go after the Death Eaters and train to go after Riddle and live to tell the tale. Take a few minutes to decide where you'd fit the best." Harry let people talk together for a bit then said, "Horcrux team, please meet in that corner. Research team, please meet in the corner over there. Fighting team, please meet in the far corner."

Hermione, Luna, Flitwick, Poppy, Arabella, Diggle, and Tom the bartender made their way to the research table. Professor Flitwick immediately said, "Hermione, you far and away have the best research mind in the group. I nominate you as team leader." Everyone else agreed and that was that.

Harry walked over for a moment and said, "Initially I'll need you to focus on researching what the missing Horcrux might be, and battlefield healing. I've previously asked Professor Flitwick to research the Horcrux curse itself so we can understand how to safely destroy the objects when we're ready. Poppy will need to teach you as much battlefield healing as possible. I know that we'll need those skills sooner or later." They nodded and he went to the Horcrux team.

At the Horcrux team table Remus, Arthur, Hagrid, Minerva, Sturgis, Ron, Bill, and Ginny all sat down. Minerva nominated Remus. When Harry got there, he told them that they would follow up on the leads provided by the research team and physically recover the Horcruxes themselves. He said, "Bill, I'm glad that you volunteered for this group. I wish that we'd had your curse breaking skills the day the professor and I went after the locket. This is dangerous work. Riddle guarded the locket with a lake full of infiri." He went to meet with the fighting team.

Moody was pleased to see Kingsley, Neville, Tonks, Fred, George, Hestia and Aberforth follow him to the table. When Harry arrived Moody asked him what he had in mind for the group. Harry replied, "I'll be a member of this team until the Horcruxes are found. I'd like

you and Kingsley to help train us to learn and practice advanced tactical fighting techniques so that we can effectively go and attack a small group of Death Eaters.”

Moody and Kingsley nodded. They knew that Harry’s words were objectively spoken and not a slam on the Auror group.

A few minutes later, Harry gathered everyone back together. When everyone was seated he said, “We don’t need another police group that is trained primarily to react. I want to be able to set an ambush and go after the Death Eaters offensively. Initially, I want the fighting team to become a major thorn in Riddle’s side to distract his attention away from the Horcruxes. I want the research team to try and find where the Horcruxes might be located and what the last piece might be. After they have been found and recovered, I want to resort the Order into a battlefield healing team and a fighting team. I would anticipate that most of the Horcrux team would join the fighting team.”

Everyone nodded, pleased with their new assignments. Harry wanted to end the meeting soon, but had one more story to tell. He said, “I want to tell everyone what happened with the locket and up in the tower. I don’t want to be accused of keeping a lot of secrets from the group. Early in the morning, Professor Dumbledore and I had set out to go to Dover. The Professor had found a cave where he thought one of the Horcruxes had been located because it was a place where young Riddle may have tormented some of the other kids at the orphanage when he was growing up.”

Harry went on to tell about the blood spell at the secret door, the pond full of the undead, the island, the potion bowl and recovering the fake locket. Then he told them of returning to Hogsmede, seeing the Dark Mark and a chilling first hand account of Dumbledore’s murder. As Harry was finishing his story, they could hear the beautiful phoenix song, and saw a flash of flame as a young phoenix appeared before their eyes. Slightly smaller than Fawkes had been, the young female had red and white plumage. It flew to Harry’s shoulder and sang for a minute. Harry stroked the beautiful bird as everyone gathered around to see her. Other than Fawkes, only Hagrid had ever seen another phoenix before.

Harry thanked everyone for coming, asked that the individual groups arrange to meet at least once during the week and that the full group meet again next weekend. Remembering one last thing, he took the shrunken trunk out of his robe pocket with the professor's extra things. "Hermione helped me sort through the professor's personal things. I kept the books, his pensive and some other things that might help me. There are a lot of photographs here, some robes, scarves, shoes and the like. Please take a look through the trunk and take whatever you'd like either for a keepsake or to be able to use. The rest will be given to Gladrags."

The wizards and witches sorted through the box with everyone selecting a dozen items that they could use as well as a photograph or two. Harry and Hermione took the Floo back to Grimmauld Place, exhausted after a very long day. Ron and Ginny said that they'd be over in the morning.

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A/N

Thanks to Steve, Alyx and Bob.

Unnamed Story by Kinsfire looks interesting (NC17)

Of the good guys, who should never be killed? (If they die, you will hate the story)

Should Harry support Scrimgeour? What is the cost of not supporting him

In my other stories, I've had Harry finish off Voldie in a variety of ways. Does anyone have a clever favorite?

If you're reading a great post HBP story, please let me know.

Chapter Six

Sunday June 16

Sunday morning Harry awoke with a start. The young phoenix had returned. Hedwig looked on with interest as Harry greeted the new arrival. "Hello girl. Are you looking for a place to stay?"

The phoenix trilled an affirmative response. Harry said, "I'll get you a really nice perch this morning. Will you be all right staying by Hedwig in the mean time?"

The phoenix let out another affirmative trill. By this time, Emma and Hermione had come up to see what was making the heartening song.

"Harry what's that beautiful bird?" asked Emma, obviously mesmerized by the bird.

"G'morning Emma," said Harry, who was obviously pleased with the bird's presence. "She's a phoenix. She came to me last night."

Emma looked at her carefully, amazed at the coloring. "We never saw anything like that when we first took Hermione into Diagon Alley for school supplies. Where would you buy one?"

Hermione said, "You could never buy one, Mum. A phoenix chooses a witch or wizard to stay with. This one just came to Harry last night when we were at the castle. Only a few witches or wizards have had phoenixes bond with them – Dumbledore, Nicolas Flamel, Godric Gryffindor, Agrippa, Circe ... and Harry." She looked at him strangely.

"Amazing," said Dan who had come up to see what everyone was talking about.

"Harry, what are you going to call her?" asked Emma.

"Dunno," said Harry.

Hermione suggested, "How about Brigid? She was a Celtic goddess of inspiration and healing." The young phoenix trilled at the name.

"We'll go get you a perch after breakfast," said Harry. "Winky?"

"Breakfast is ready, Harry Potter sir." The little elf looked up at him hopefully.

Harry looked at her and said, "Thank you Winky. We'll be down in ten minutes."

She beamed at him, and then popped away.

... --- ...

"It's them coin collector bandits, officer. I'm sure of it." The barmaid was doing her best to keep her voice low on the telephone.

"OK, Ma'am. We'll send a patrol over right away."

Putting down the telephone, she returned to their table and said, "How about some more coffee or tea, gentlemen? Maybe a pint to start the day?"

"Not today," said the older one. "We must be on our way. How much do we owe you?"

"Seven quid. I'll bring you your bill in just a moment," she said, hoping to stall them for another few minutes.

Draco winged to Snape, "Why can't I keep track of the money? I was doing fine."

"You ordered more than we had funds for the last time we went out, and caused another disturbance. These coins have nowhere near the value of a galleon. We don't want to get..."

"Hands up, gentlemen, and you won't have any trouble." The officer and his partner were looking at the two with some disdain, having a hard time connecting the two apparent losers in front of them with the reported armed robbers.

“Don’t do anything, Draco,” hissed Snape. Malfoy nodded, both hands in plain sight, but he had his wand in his wrist holster, ready for instant use if needed.

“How can we help you, Officer?” said Snape politely. He was exercising a much better grasp of the situation than Malfoy.

“You two need to come with us,” said the partner.

“Yes sir,” said Snape. “We need to pay for our breakfast first. We’ll just be a moment.” Snape pulled seven of the one pound coins out of his pocket and handed them to the server.

The officer led the two into the back of the police car, and went back in to join his partner taking a statement from the pub server.

A moment later they returned to the car to find it empty, both back doors still locked. They never heard a disillusioned Snape hiss Obliviate, eliminating any memory of the two. The video camera mounted in the front of the police cruiser would clearly show the two being led to the car, though neither officer had any recollection of the two men. By Monday, their photographs would be printed be in every newspaper in Britain.

Back at their hideout home, Snape berated Malfoy, saying, “Conjure something yourself next time if you don’t like my cooking. You could have gotten us arrested or forced a fight that we don’t need.”

Malfoy said, “Your cooking tastes like shite. Is it one of your ingredients?”

At that moment, they felt the Dark Mark burn on their left forearms and forgot their verbal feud. Homing in on the source, they apparated to the back garden at the home where Voldemort was staying.

As they apparated and formed a circle around the Dark Lord. Riddle was pleased to see Snape and Malfoy together, but noticed that neither one looked very good. In all there were forty wizards and a few witches in the circle. However well more than half were new recruits, some since Dumbledore’s murder. Malfoy nodded at Zabini,

Nott and Millicent Bulstrode, who were standing in the center without masks.

Riddle turned around to look at each of them then began. "Welcome Death Eaters. The fortunes of war and planning have been on our side lately." He handed them each money bags with several thousand Galleons. Continuing he said, "Two of our number managed to remove a great obstacle from our paths by eliminating the mudblood loving fool, Albus Dumbledore. Draco, Severus, please come forward."

Both men came forward and knelt before the Dark Lord.

"Draco, you executed a difficult plan. You now have full Death Eater status. Rise."

Draco rose and bowed his head slightly to Voldemort who nodded back.

"Severus, you completed the task for Draco. Let it be known that you have joined Bella and Wormtail in my inner circle." Snape bowed deeply to Riddle who tapped his shoulder with his wand as if knighting him.

He continued. "In four weeks time we will launch an attack against the Ministry officials. That muggle loving fool Arthur Weasley's son will be marrying a part human. The ceremony will be held at the Burrow. I expect that the Minister of Magic Rufus Scrimgeour, most of the department heads, the traitorous Hogwarts professors, and several hundred guests will be there."

On the surface the plan didn't look very promising. Forty-five Death Eaters, mostly half-trained against two to three hundred armed witches and wizards and at least a dozen Aurors. No one said anything, hoping for the rest of the plan to be announced.

"To even the odds and create panic, I will be bringing in two hundred Dementors. We will attempt to set up anti-apparation wards over the property to minimize the possibility of escape. I want you to initially focus on attacking Potter, Scrimgeour, Hammer, and the Hogwarts

staff for the first ten seconds, then parry with them until the dementors can begin to consume the witches and wizards. ”

“To create a diversion, Bella has arranged to have an attack at Potter’s mudblood friend Granger tonight and another house raid a week before the wedding. I don’t want to lose any Death Eaters at these house raids. Get in, seal and torch the house, fire the Mark and get out. Bella will announce the selections after I am finished.”

He noticed quite a few of the new recruits looking excited at the possibility of the raid. He continued. “If we achieve the level of success that I anticipate with the attack at the Weasley wedding, I expect that we will be in a position to liberate our fellow Death Eaters who are awaiting us at Azkaban.”

Voldemort looked out at the hungry Death Eaters. Wormtail had found useful information and Bella had turned a good lead into the potential to massacre the opposition in a single afternoon. No longer concerned about Snape’s true loyalty, he could announce his plans much earlier and create more complex plans with the individuals assigned to different roles.

“I also expect that several of the goblins from Gringotts will be in attendance. Under no circumstances are they to be targeted.” He did not wish to alienate the goblins further than he needed to

With Scrimgeour out of the way, Voldemort was certain that he could gain control of the Ministry and his renew his sources of galleons. With the unavailability of the account that Lucius had been managing and the ministry theft of Borgin’s account, Bulstrode’s account was being depleted rapidly. He would need to correct the situation before the end of the year.

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Bella had selected ten of the newest recruits to be on the Granger raid. Her plan was to apparate to the home slightly after midnight and group up with the Death Eaters. She would have two pairs of two recruits stand guard on either end of the street. The other six would circle the house and cast the Colloportus charm, sealing the doors

and windows, while she cast an anti-apparation ward on the structure designed to prevent the occupants from escaping. They would then fire the house by simultaneously casting Incendio charms. If everything went as planned, the time on the property would be less than thirty seconds.

Bella liked using that method because it was almost as terrifying for any witches or wizards who might come onto the scene as it was for the occupants. She selected a different set of new Death Eaters for the raid at the Creevey brothers' home.

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As Lestrage was explaining her plan, Voldemort found Bulstrode and asked, "What is the account balance Stephen?"

"A million one hundred thousand, Master. How may I serve you?"

"Bring me two hundred thousand galleons by late evening." Riddle never even considered the possibility that Bulstrode might be stealing from him, but he always let the overly large man become nervous anyway as he looked at him.

"As you command, Master."

"Leave now. I have others to speak to."

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Mrs. Weasley saw a gnome in the back garden and called Ron and Ginny to come out and de-gnome it. A twig was out of place and she told Ron to trim the entire hedge when he was done.

Ron said, "Mum, we were going to go visit Harry and help him with one of his rooms."

His protests fell of deaf ears. "If they start coming back, they'll infest the whole garden and we'll never have them cleaned out in time for the wedding. Harry won't mind if you go visit him later in the afternoon. Ginny can leave after you're done with the gnomes."

“Why doesn’t she have Phlegm go and charm the gnomes away?” muttered Ginny. “If they’re anything like you Ron, she could offer to kiss them once and they’d follow her anywhere.”

Ron’s face turned redder than it already was. He still hadn’t developed much immunity around Bill’s fiancé. He tossed the gnome that had bitten Wormtail over the hedge. He said, “Tell Harry I’ll be there by two.”

Ginny finished getting changed and took the floo to Harry’s home.

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Stephen Bulstrode had practiced the transaction and hoped to be at the bank no more than ten minutes including the cart rides. He reached the apparation point in Knockturn alley and carried the large case with him. He made his way to the shortest teller line and handed the goblin his key. He never noticed the dark haired teen standing in the next line as the goblin said, “This way Mr. Bulstrode.”

Harry looked at the case that Bulstrode was carrying and recognized it as being identical to the case that Borgin had been carrying. After Bulstrode got into the cart Harry went out and thought hard about his new phoenix friend, Brigid. In a flash she appeared. Stroking the beautiful bird, Harry said, “Brigid, will you please get this to Tonks immediately? It’s very important.”

Brigid bowed her head, fluttered into the air for a moment, and vanished in a burst of flame.

A minute passed, then another, then another without Tonks appearing. Harry was certain that Bulstrode must be on his way back up. He was pretty sure that Bulstrode would have someone watching his back once he got outside the bank.

Another minute passed and Harry made up his mind. He drew his wand and concealed it in his sleeve and walked into the bank. As he was walking up the lobby, Bulstrode was walking out. There was another wizard at his side that Harry didn’t recognize.

Hoping against hope that he'd remain lucky, Harry fired a stunner and hit Bulstrode squarely in the chest. The other wizard had been alert and fired back a jet of purple light at Harry who rolled to the side and fired again and grazed the other wizard.

At that moment, Aurors Tonks, Alyx and Dawlish burst into the door. Dawlish said, "Nobody move. Ministry Aurors."

The other wizard took another shot at Harry, and missed. The green jet hit Dawlish who immediately went down. Harry fired a Reducto curse and the man flew backwards in a giant splatter of blood.

Alyx tried to help Dawlish as Tonks ran to the other wizard. Harry went to Bulstrode and kicked his wand over to the side.

As Harry reached Bulstrode, another team of Aurors along with Director Hammer ran to the scene. The Goblin guards sealed the doorway.

Alyx hadn't even graduated from the Auror Academy yet. She was only three years older than Harry, and was a second year cadet. Dawlish had been giving her a lesson on battlefield evasion tactics when Tonks had burst in the classroom looking for immediate help. In ten seconds, she had learned a life lesson that would last her entire career – never lose concentration in a firefight.

The other Aurors immediately restunned Bulstrode as Hammer pulled Harry into one of the conference rooms. Sitting him down in one of the chairs she closed the door and without a trace of a smile said, "Explain yourself, Mr. Potter."

Harry immediately realized that he was in a much different situation than he had been in with Borgin. He hadn't been accompanied by an Auror and was completely on his own. From one perspective he had simply drawn his wand on a wizard in a completely unprovoked attack. He placed his wand on the table and pushed it to Director Hammer.

She looked at his wand, and at his blood splattered robes and said, "Speak." She didn't want to arrest Potter, but needed some answers, and needed them now.

There was a knock on the door. Hammer opened the door, walked out for a moment closing the door behind her to get a report from the investigating Aurors. Three minutes later she walked back into the room, followed by Tonks, Minister Scrimgeour and Auror Trainee Alyx.

They all sat down, and a Goblin brought in tea. Hammer poured each of them a cup and said, in a much less threatening voice, "Please tell us what happened Harry. You aren't in any kind of trouble." She ran her fingers along his wand and handed it back to him.

Harry said, "I was in line at the counter and a man walked up to the next counter. I happened to look over at him because he was in the next line and the teller mentioned that his name was Mr. Bulstrode. I know that his daughter is a big Voldemort supporter. Then I noticed that he had the identical carrying case that Mr. Borgin had been carrying when he was taking all of that gold out of the bank."

Harry took a breath and continued. "I got out of line and ran outside. I called for my phoenix to help me get a message to Auror Tonks as soon as possible. I waited as long as I could then went back into the bank. Mr. Bulstrode was about to leave. I fired a stunner at him. The man that was walking by him fired a purple spell back at me. I dodged it, and fired a stunner at him. I didn't hit him squarely. He fired a killing curse at me and missed. I hit him pretty hard with a Reducto blast. The next thing I knew, Aurors were coming up. The only other thing I did before you found me was kick Bulstrode's wand away from his reach."

Hammer asked, "Auror Tonks, do you have anything to add?"

Tonks shook her head and replied, "Not much Director. I was down in the Auror gym when I saw a phoenix flash and drop me a note." Tonks handed the note to Hammer to look at.

Tonks,

I need help now.

Gringotts.

Harry

Tonks continued. "I looked in the canteen and the classroom for some help. I asked Senior Auror Dawlish and Cadet Alyx to immediately come with me to Gringotts. We apparated to the steps of the bank and ran in the door. Dawlish announced us as Aurors. He was hit with the killing curse that Harry referenced about the same time that I witnessed Harry disable the attacker. Cadet Alyx checked on Dawlish and I verified that the second attacker was disabled. He died a minute later. I checked his arm. He was wearing the Mark. I checked the other wizard that Harry had stunned. He also had the Mark on his arm. He is currently being held in the next room. Here is the case that he was carrying, Director. Harry almost certainly stopped another money courier."

Scrimgeour looked like Christmas had come early. This would be very good press for him, even if an Auror had been killed.

Hammer asked, "Cadet Alyx, do you have anything to add?"

"No Director. Senior Auror Dawlish was dead when I checked on him. I couldn't do anything to help him." Her face was red from tears and she looked badly shaken by the action.

There was a knock on the door.

It was Bill Weasley. "Director, I'm Bill Weasley, curse breaker for Gringotts. If you don't object, I'd like to examine that case before it is opened. We have reason to believe that Stephen Bulstrode may have spelled it when he was in the vaults. You and your party may wish to leave the room for your own safety. The choice is certainly yours."

Scrimgeour, Tonks and Cadet Alyx led Harry out of the room. Two more goblins walked into the room to help Bill. Harry noticed that the bodies of Dawlish and the other man were being removed. He felt sick. He had killed a man. He slumped to the floor and a moment

later threw up, retching until his stomach was empty, and still was heaving. Hammer walked up to the other Aurors, gave them instructions and walked over to talk with the goblin bank officials.

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Ten minutes later Weasley and the Goblins walked out of the conference room. Bill looked at Harry and the young Auror slumped on the floor with Tonks sitting by them, but couldn't say anything. He had to report to his own bosses.

Scrimgeour and Hammer went into the other conference room. A minute later two beefy looking Aurors had Bulstrode on his feet, frog marching him toward the tunnel carts.

An hour later they were back at Ministry Headquarters with the remaining nine hundred thousand galleons from the vault as well as a completed count of the satchel that remarkably contained two hundred thousand Galleons. What they didn't know was that over the course of a weekend they had effectively bankrupted Voldemort. At that moment, the Dark Lord barely had enough gold on hand to make the payroll for the next month.

... --- ...

Harry had originally gone to Diagon alley with Ginny, Hermione and Emma Granger. He had left them at the Magical Menagerie "for ten minutes, tops" to run to Gringotts to sign a paper.

Fifteen minutes passed, then thirty, with no sign of Harry. The women left the perch that they had picked out at the store to go and check on Harry. Emma wasn't worried until they got to Gringotts to find the doors sealed, with Aurors and goblin guards standing outside. Neither Ginny nor Hermione recognized any of the Aurors, and none of them looked to be in the mood to give out information.

Five minutes later, the door opened and two covered bodies were carried out on stretchers to be portkeyed back to the ministry morgue. By now a crowd had gathered outside the bank and the women

began to panic. It was obvious that some tragedy had occurred in the bank and each of them silently knew that it somehow involved Harry.

Five minutes later, Scrimgeour opened the door and went out with two of the Aurors. A reporter from the Daily Prophet asked him what happened.

Scrimgeour said, "Mr. Harry Potter helped Ministry Aurors uncover another money laundering scheme that Lord Voldemort had set up years ago. A substantial amount of gold is being seized. A Ministry Auror was killed attempting to arrest the two Death Eaters. One Death Eater was killed and another taken into custody. The Ministry is saddened by the loss of one of our Aurors who was killed in the line of duty. The names will be released later this afternoon. The ministry wishes to formally thank Mr. Potter for his part in bringing these two criminals to justice. Unfortunately there isn't time for individual questions right now. Good day."

After Scrimgeour finished, Tonks, Hammer and a half dozen Aurors escorted Harry out of the building. Tonks saw Ginny and the others and waved them over. "We need to take Harry to the Ministry for about an hour. You can either meet us there or back at Harry's home."

Naturally the three women walked to the Ministry building and were shown to the lobby outside the Department of Magical law enforcement. After sitting on the wooden bench for a few minutes, they were met by Arthur, Fred, George and finally Percy. He was carrying a tray of tea and said importantly, "Minister Scrimgeour asked me to bring this out to you. They're inside meeting with Mr. Potter."

Arthur asked, "Percy, what happened?"

Percy said, "Mr. Potter was somehow involved in the death of a Ministry Senior Auror and a Death Eater. I think he was probably a witness and is being questioned. I have other important business to attend to. Good afternoon to you." With that, he left as if to go meet with the Queen.

“Prat,” muttered Fred

“I say he’s closer to a Rat’s Arse at the moment,” replied George. Hermione and Ginny snickered, thinking that the prankster’s assessment was probably right.

Tonks came out a minute later. She told them what had happened, handing Emma a brushed aluminum case. “Please hold this for Harry. What had you originally come for today?” asked Tonks.

“A perch for Harry’s new phoenix,” replied Hermione. “We forgot all about it”.

“We’ll go get it,” said Fred and George. “We’ll bring it to Harry’s place in ten minutes.”

Tonks continued, “Harry killed a man today, and he’s understandably broken up over it.”

Emma asked, “Is he facing any legal issues? Dan and I might be able to...”

Tonks smiled sadly, and said, “No. He stopped a second money courier for Voldemort in as many days. That case you’re carrying is his reward gold.”

Emma said, “Not to pry, but it felt like the case was empty.”

Tonks took out her wand, told Emma to place the case on the floor, and took off the lightening charm. She said, “Now try it.”

Emma couldn’t move the case. It weighed over two hundred pounds! Tonks recharmed the case. “Emma said, “The ministry must be very grateful for his help.” Tonks nodded.

Ignoring her mum’s apparent fascination with Harry’s briefcase Hermione asked, “Aren’t there counselors who would be assigned in a case like this?”

“Tonks replied, “No. The Wizarding world is way behind the rest of the population in that regard. I need to go back in now.”

Emma nodded as Tonks left and said, “This isn’t an isolated incident. So many of the victims and participants are teenagers.”

Hermione replied, “Susan Bones cried for weeks last term. People just avoided her rather than doing anything constructive to help.”

A few minutes Harry came out and said, “Let’s go home now.” Arthur patted Harry on the back and said, “Molly and I will bring over dinner for you tonight, Harry. We’re all thankful that you weren’t injured.”

Harry nodded weakly and replied, “Thanks, Mr. Weasley.”

Emma said, “We should go now. ‘We’ll see you later, Arthur.” Harry, Hermione, Ginny and Emma were escorted out of the building and to Emma’s car.

... --- ...

Scrimgeour incorrectly assumed that they had captured two of many account couriers that Voldemort was using to move his money. As such, he believed the Death Eaters to be numbered in the hundreds rather than the fifty that Voldemort truly had. Scrimgeour had done nothing to improve relations with the goblins and as such, they had no reason to co-operate by helping him find any of Voldemort’s other vaults.

Scrimgeour felt like he needed Potter now more than ever. In truth, Harry had publicly done more to aid the war effort than all of the rest of the Ministry combined. Potter had originally refused the two hundred thousand Galleons that Scrimgeour had given him as a reward. Only after he had told Potter that Dawlish had no living relatives and Potter had designated half of the gold to go to a victims’ relief fund would he agree to accept the other half.

Potter initially refused to have his photo taken, but had agreed to after Scrimgeour promised him that Stan Shunpike would be released within the hour. Seeing an opportunity to right a wrong, Harry

immediately had agreed, and several photos were taken. They were slowly creating an informal working relationship.

... --- ...

It was a quiet ride back to Grimmauld Place. The only sound came from Emma's CD player. When they got back, Emma asked Harry where he wanted his case put away.

As he was climbing the stairs to go to his room, he said, "Just put it in the library, please." He went to his room and quietly closed the door behind him.

Emma put the aluminum case in the library and was shocked to see five other identical cases arranged in a neat little row.

An hour later Harry was still in his room crying into his pillow. He had killed a man. He was a murderer. No one could ever love him, or look at him the same way again. He hurt so badly that he never noticed Ginny come into the room and curl up beside him. Later when he had quieted down, she nuzzled his neck with her nose, and the smallest of smiles crept onto his face as he looked into her bright eyes.

She softly said the words that he so desperately needed to hear. "I don't hate you Harry. No one here thinks badly of you. I love you." She made certain to maintain some sort of skin to skin contact, touching his cheek or his face, so he wouldn't slip back into one of his pools of depression. He stopped sinking, and his breathing evened out. A few hours later, she nudged him and asked, "Are you ready to get up now? Dinner's almost ready. Go take a shower and be back down in ten minutes." She kissed his cheek and gave him a gentle squeeze. "OK?"

Harry nodded as she got up. The shower did feel good. When he got out of the bathroom, Harry noticed that Ginny had set a pair of comfortable jeans and one of his shirts that she liked best on his bed for him.

... --- ...

While the two had been napping, Molly had walked up the stairs to check on them. Unable to find anything inappropriate with their behavior, and feeling so much love for the young man, she let them be. Having her daughter hopelessly in love with Harry Potter wasn't really new or unexpected. She was delighted that Harry seemed to have feelings toward her Ginny in return.

At the same time, her greatest fear remained that one of her children or their loved ones would be claimed by the war. The war had struck at so many of her friends' homes. Molly was ever grateful that she had remained lucky.

Covering both of them with a light quilt, she smiled to herself and went downstairs to start dinner.

... --- ...

Dinner was generally quiet. Tonks and Lupin, Dan and Emma, Ron and Hermione, Harry and Ginny, Molly and Arthur each held individual conversations. None of them could really find the words that were so hard to say.

After dinner Tonks left for a moment and returned with Auror Cadet Alyx. Alyx greeted the Grangers, and said, "Hello Hermione. It's good to see you again."

Hermione smiled at the former Ravenclaw who was three years older than her. They had studied together from time to time, and had remained friendly since Hermione's first year. Hermione said, "It's good to see you again, Alyx. How have you been?"

Alyx's winsome smile disappeared and she replied, "I was called on an emergency assignment today at Gringotts. One of my instructors was killed. Harry saved us."

Hermione hugged the young woman with the glistening blue eyes and said, "He does that kind of thing. You get used to it after a while. I'm glad you weren't hurt."

Alyx's voice was anything but steady. "Hermione, I was so scared. We had walked into Gringotts a moment earlier and Instructor Dawlish just fell over. Harry stopped the other Death Eater a few seconds later. I'd never seen a man hit by the killing curse before. He didn't even have time to close his eyes. I was so scared, I was sure I would be next." She walked over to Harry, gave him a hug, and said, "Thanks Harry. I owe you my life."

Arthur and Ginny piped in, "Us too."

Harry looked down at his feet and replied, "I just did what had to be done. I was really scared too." She was still holding him. Hermione and Ginny exchanged knowing glances at each other over Harry's obvious embarrassment. Alyx was a very healthy young woman.

Ron came in with a bucket of butterbeer bottles. He stared awestruck at Alyx, still hovering by Harry and said, "Bustybeer anyone?"

Tonks whacked Ron on the back of the head and said, "That will be so expensive, my dear. You will pay and pay over that slip." Then she smiled at the stricken teen, took several bottles from him, and handed them out to Alyx, Harry, Hermione, and Ginny.

They had a better evening together than any of them would have guessed. Together they kept Harry out of a funk and kept away Alyx's nightmares. Tonks left about eleven to take Alyx back home.

Before she left, Alyx went up to Harry and said, "Thanks again, Harry. You're a good man."

Harry replied, "I'm glad that you're safe Alyx. I'll see you later."

"Goodnight Alyx," said Hermione and Ginny.

... --- ...

At midnight, the Death Eaters assembled at the park near the Granger house. As by clockwork, Flint and another new recruit, Ratin, broke off to stand at one end of the street while two others went to the other. The lights on in the home indicated that the residents were

still up. Silently the six Death Eaters circled the house and waited for Lestrangle to give the signal. Lestrangle took almost a minute to cast the anti-apparation charm around the home. When she finished, a blue crackle of light like static electricity shot around the home. There was no change in the lights inside, so Lestrangle assumed that they hadn't been seen.

She raised her arm, giving the signal for the recruits to begin sealing the home. Nott and Zabini called "Coloportus" in an overly loud school classroom voice. Their words seemed to reverberate through the night air. Apparently they hadn't been paying attention when Snape had taught his students to cast silently.

Next door a dog began barking in the back yard, and a yard light went on in the neighbor's back garden. Bella knew that they had mere seconds to complete their task without engaging the neighbors. "Incendio, Incendio." Within seconds, a dozen individual fires had been started at the doors of the house and along the roofline.

"Leave now," said Bellatrix as she cast the Dark Mark into the sky above the flaming home.

The Death Eaters began to disappear or in some cases pull portkeys from their robes if they could not yet apparate away from the home.

In the darkness none of them saw Moody cast tracking charms on two of the Death Eaters before they left.

The raid had taken nearly three minutes.

... --- ...

A/Ns

Has anyone read a good story on killing Dementors? They seem like nasty creatures. I don't want to use the golden Patronus.

Is Riddle's snake a boa or some other type?

Crescent Moon by JazzyGeorgie is a fun read that isn't widely known.

Chapter 7

Saturday July 12.

Nearly three weeks had passed since Alastor Moody had informed the dentists that eleven Death Eaters had destroyed their home in the middle of the night hoping to murder them at the same time. Dan and especially Emma had been saddened by the loss, but all three of the Grangers were grateful that they were alive. They were even more grateful that several days earlier they'd had an hour to remove their important papers, photos and their keepsake possessions from their home. The local authorities could find no evidence of arson. As such, it was being handled as an accidental fire insurance claim rather than an act of war.

At Hermione's pleading, her parents had temporarily closed their surgery, and were safe at hand staying at Grimmauld Place helping out as they could. In reality, they were three more refugees of an undeclared war.

The subgroups of the Order that Harry had created had begun meeting in earnest that week. Flitwick and Hermione began their searches for information about Horcruxes in their respective locations. Flitwick scoured the Hogwarts restricted section, the staff library and even went through Snape's private quarters. Flitwick had found several references regarding Horcruxes, while Hermione hadn't found anything in the Black library.

Bill had used his contacts with the Gringotts cursebreakers to find that the horcrux objects themselves need only be destroyed to release their contents. No special ritual would be needed. None of them had found conclusive documentation that indicated whether Riddle would know if one had been destroyed or would be somehow weakened when it happened. Bill told them that once bound to an object, there was no known means of reattaching the soul piece back to the person.

The rest of the research team had begun their training in battlefield healing. Poppy worked with Luna, Molly, and Diggle. Mrs. Figg had been given lists of potions to brew. Harry was somewhat shocked to

find that she was quite skilled in brewing potions. While growing up he had always thought that her home smelled of cabbage. In fact, it was the cauldrons brewing potions in her cellar that gave off the different aromas. Harry directed her to develop some stock of blood replenishing potion, pain relief potions, skele-gro, veritaserum, polyjuice potion and the felix felicis potions. Tom the bartender helped her quietly obtain the more difficult to find ingredients. She was shocked but grateful when Harry had given her five thousand galleons to get everything that she had needed.

The Horcrux team started out with good luck. Aided greatly by the photos that Harry had been able to provide, Arthur and Sturgis had located the Hufflepuff cup within a week. They had been cataloging the contents of the Malfoy estate when they had come across the fabled cup. Podmore had stolen it from the warehouse and the next day it was sitting on one of the tables in Harry's library.

After that, the trail had grown rather cold until Hermione took a look at the Black family tapestry as it was being taken down a week later. Regulus Allen Black, Sirius' brother had been a Death Eater, but had been killed by Voldemort himself in 1980. Again aided by the photo that Harry had provided, Remus found the locket along with a pile of photos and other trinkets that Kreacher had squirreled away.

Thus far their list looked like this:

Horcrux 1 – Diary – Destroyed

Horcrux 2 – Unknown

Horcrux 3 – Ring – Destroyed

Horcrux 4 – Locket – Found

Horcrux 5 – Cup – Found

Horcrux 6 – Nagini – Presumed to be with Riddle

Piece 7 – Tom Riddle

They had no plans to go after the snake until they had at least located the others. Holding out some hope that Riddle was still unaware of their quest, they wanted to find the unknown piece before going after Riddle's pet snake.

The fighting team had been given instruction during the days by Moody. Kingsley and Hestia gave them practical exercises during the evenings. Cadet Alyx who was invited into the Order a few days after the Gringotts fight soon joined Tonks, Fred, George, and Harry.

Harry was surprised to find that after two years, Alyx's fighting skills weren't much better than the DA members. She was initially a bit insulted by his remark, but justified herself saying, "Harry, mostly we've covered the law and principles of investigation so far. The practical exercises will be largely covered in the third year."

Gred and Forge mostly took turns volunteering to duel with the very pretty young woman. Her good looks generally worked to her advantage as both Fred and George invariably hesitated for a split second before attacking her.

Harry and Tonks consistently worked together against Hestia and Kingsley who were both good fighters. After three weeks practice, they typically were able to fight to a draw. That was a substantial improvement over their starting point. Harry had regretted not continuing with the DA group in the last year, instead wasting countless hours practicing Quidditch moves against now meaningless opponents.

... --- ...

The addition of nearly four million galleons to the Ministry coffers had taken a considerable amount of stress off of Scrimgeour's shoulders. The capture or death of three Death Eaters had provided proof that the Ministry, if not actually winning the war was making visible progress. Scrimgeour had quietly freed Stan Shunpike and at Harry's insistence provided him with five thousand galleons in compensation for his eleven months of false imprisonment.

Scrimgeour had managed to keep the firing of the Granger house out of the wizarding press, and as no one had actually been actually hurt, rationalized that it didn't really matter.

His only unpleasant bit of business had been attending slain Auror Dale Dawlish's funeral. Aside from his fellow Aurors, there had been an uncomfortably small crowd in attendance. Only the other Auror Instructor Bob Mann had spoken at the funeral. Apparently Dawlish hadn't taken the time to make friends outside the department.

... --- ...

Voldemort was delighted when all eleven of the Death Eaters had returned back from the raid at the Granger home. It had been a while since he'd had good news regarding an operation. He had greeted them briefly upon their return, but sensing something amiss, quickly dismissed them.

That evening he asked Bellatrix when she had the other raid planned on the mudblood wizard boys, the Creeveys.

"Saturday the twelfth. The first group took too long, but everyone did their job. I want to get the second group in and out much quicker. We will do better, Master," she said certain of herself.

"I'm certain that you will," hissed Riddle. "What time do you expect to start the raid at the Weasley wedding?"

"Eight PM on the nineteenth. The ceremony will be over and the guests will still be seated for dinner. Since they won't be moving around, we will have the best opportunity to focus on the main targets."

Riddle could find no fault in her plan and replied, "Good. Since the dementors can't move too quickly, after your initial attack it will be your job to keep the victims pinned down for a minute or two until the dementors can get in place and begin feeding. They will arrive from three sides then close the circle around them. Use Wormtail to your best advantage."

Bella nodded.

Voldemort continued. It was obvious that he had other plans as well. "While the dementors are finishing their work, the Death Eaters will return here to regroup and we will liberate our imprisoned Death Eaters the same night. I anticipate that the Dementors will inflict over a hundred deaths, and no one will be available to answer the call to reinforce the pitiful guardians of Azkaban fortress. By morning, the remainder of the Ministry will sue for surrender."

Bella was stunned by the boldness of the plan, and equally nervous over the logistics of carrying it out. The Dark Lord was obviously relying on incurring few, if any casualties at the wedding. It would be difficult enough to train the twenty newest recruits to survive the first raid, let alone a raid on the great wizarding prison. Half of them still required portkeys, as they couldn't reliably apparate.

Voldemort continued. "I will have Severus and Draco plan the raid on Azkaban Fortress if you're overtaxed with the wedding." He knew that she would rise to his goad and accept the extra challenge."

"No, Master. I will carry it out as well. Perhaps Snape could teach some of the recruits how to apparate. He does have teaching experience. At least a dozen or more need additional practice."

"I will have him work with them. Are there any other tasks that you'd like to delegate upward?"

Realizing that his good grace was rapidly wearing thin, she said in a very respectful tone, "No Master. We will report back late early on the morning of the thirteenth."

... --- ... ---

Harry wanted to spend some time alone with Ginny and knew that Hermione and Ron felt the same. None of them had left the Burrow or Grimmauld Place since Gringotts except to go to Hogwarts once for an Order meeting. As much as he liked Hermione's parents and Ginny's family, he just wanted some time alone with Ginny.

Remus and Tonks came to the rescue. Harry told him what he wanted and they complied. On Friday the eleventh, two ministry cars arrived at five PM. The drivers took each of the young couples on a leisurely ride for an hour before arriving at side-by-side restaurants.

One was an Italian restaurant, the other a Chinese restaurant. Tonks met them at the door. She was wearing a white linen shirt and jeans that looked like they'd been made for her. She said, "One couple has a reservation at one side, the other over there. You pick. We will meet up at nine and go to the muggle movies across the street."

Ron wanted to go to the Italian place and order pizza, so they parted ways. Harry took Ginny's hand and led her into the Chinese restaurant. Helping her to her chair, Harry said, "I've never been to a Chinese restaurant before."

"Me neither," replied Ginny.

The server was very nice. He suggested that they order the sampler platter for two. They brought out huge portions of cream cheese wontons, hot and sour soup, lemon chicken, beef and peapods, soft noodles, fried rice, and desert cookies.

Harry and Ginny tried everything and had fun trying to pick up their food with the two pair of wooden chopsticks that the server had given them in addition to their other utensils.

After dinner, Harry paid the server and they met up with Tonks and Remus who had been sitting outside the Italian restaurant eating their own dinner.

A few minutes later Ron and Hermione came out bickering as usual. "It should have been obvious that it wasn't a wizarding restaurant. Obviously they wouldn't convert galleons to Sterling. It was just lucky that mum had given me some extra money just in case."

"I didn't..."

“Don’t worry about it, Ron.” said Remus gently. He had been poor too much of his life to let his newly inherited money change his outlook. “Plenty of wizards have gone out on dates without their moneybags.”

“Mad Eye,” smirked Tonks and Harry together. They walked across the street and got in line to see the new film, Titanic. Harry bought everyone popcorn, pop and two extra treats for Ron, who was delighted with them.

The film had something for everyone. Ron kept muttering, “Why didn’t someone just do a Reparo charm?”

Hermione just shook her head in wonder. Ron was generally fun to be with, but with the exception of money issues, he could be every bit as arrogant toward nonmagical people as Malfoy.

On the way back Ginny said, “Thanks for arranging this Harry. I had a great time.” She snuggled as close to him as possible.

Remus said, “It was good for all of us to get out and have a fun evening.”

Harry nodded. He’d had a great evening like the others, but had a very early morning ahead of him. He sent Ginny back to the Burrow several hours before she wanted to go.

... --- ... ---

As Ginny was drifting off to sleep, Thomas Creevey and his wife Elsie heard the sound of voices in their front yard. Thomas, a milk deliveryman, managed to get four rounds fired from his side by side double barreled shotgun before his family was engulfed by the flames. Pansy Parkinson’s cousins Ester and Pat were crumpled in the yard, while Crabbe’s older brother Rutt had lost an arm at the shoulder. He would die several hours later from blood loss.

... --- ... ---

At 4AM Tonks got up and put on the dragonhide pants and vest that Harry had bought for everyone in the Order. The armor offered

considerably more protection than anything that the Ministry had purchased for its employees. It was obvious that Harry was willing to spend his way into safety to give them any extra measure of protection, and she was grateful. She went down to the kitchen and met Harry who had made coffee and some toasted muffins. A few minutes later, Kingsley, Fred, George, Hestia, Moody and Alex joined them, having used the floo.

They were going to snatch the two Death Eaters that Moody had tagged at the Granger house. As planned they divided up into teams. Fred, George, Hestia and Moody were on the team that would go after Theodore Nott. Harry, Tonks, Alyx and Kingsley would go after Blaise Zabini.

Moody checked everyone's gear. Each of them had a spare wand, anti-apparition manacles, an invisibility cloak, emergency portkeys, a transport portkey and an owl. In each case, they would apparate to a spot a quarter mile from their home, get into position and wait until 7AM. They would release the owl and hopefully draw the target out of their home. Then the plan called for the raiders to stun the targets, capture them and use the portkey to take them to the Auror holding cells.

The Nott team left first. They quickly covered the distance between that apparation point and Nott's home. Fred, George, and Hestia found places to hide near the back door while Mad Eye scanned the house to make certain that Nott and his mother were home.

The Zabini team left a few minutes later. They took considerably longer to get into position as there was much less cover to hide with. Tonks and Alyx waited on the side of the house so they could see the front while Kingsley and Harry waited in the back on either side of the back door. Kingsley was under Harry's cloak while Harry was behind a bush right next to the door.

At 7:00 Alyx let the barn owl loose. It tapped on the back window. As if on cue, Blaise opened the door and reached for the owl. As he looked at the owl's leg, he picked up a famous wizard card. It was Dumbledore. As Blaise looked at the card, Harry took careful aim and

stunned the young Death Eater. The card fell to the ground, and the owl flew back to Alyx. Moments later, Kingsley ran up, slapped the anti-apparation manacle on Zabini and activated the portkey. Harry made eye contact with Tonks and Alyx who were acting as backup, and activated his portkey. The two witches did the same a moment later. From the time of Harry's stunner until Tonks and Alyx activated their portkey was twelve seconds. Moody would say that they had taken too long, but they would work on it.

As Harry was walking to his back door, he saw Fred and George appear a few feet away followed by Mad Eye a moment later. They all nodded at each other, and Harry said, "Come in. Let's have breakfast."

They were met inside by Hermione, Dan, Emma and Remus. The Grangers looked to be a mixture of both worried and relieved. Remus knew that they were on a grab mission, but hadn't said anything to the Grangers.

"Good morning," said Dan. "Winky has breakfast ready." Harry and the others went inside and set their packs down. After they had all sat down at the table Emma asked, "If it's possible, could you tell us where you were all night?"

As Fred and George were beginning to mouth ahh... and umm... respectively, Moody replied, "We managed to capture and arrest two of the Death Eaters who were responsible for burning down your home and trying to murder your family."

Dan and Emma were starting to say something when Hermione cut them off asking, "Who?"

Moody replied, "Nott's son, Theodore and Blaise Zabini."

Hermione nodded sadly and Emma said, "Thank you. Thank you all. We don't know what else to say. The house held a lot of good memories for us, but we still have the ones that matter."

Tears were running down Hermione's face. She had worked on an arithmancy project with Zabini in her fourth year and last week he had

tried to murder her. It frightened her that Voldemort and LeStrange could inspire such misguided hatred.

An hour later, they were finishing breakfast when the news owl came to the window. Remus took the paper from the owl, put the Knuts in its pouch and unfolded the paper to look at it. A moment later, he put it down and said, "Bad news."

... --- ...

Harry had taken the deaths of Colin and Dennis quite hard. He smiled as he remembered little Dennis telling Colin, "I fell in." on his first trip across the lake at Hogwarts. Neither boy had ever hurt or crossed anyone. Harry was certain that Malfoy or Snape had selected the target believing that they would be absolutely defenseless. Harry was glad to read that Mr. Creevey had taken two or three of the cowards out before succumbing to the fire.

... --- ...

Harry's thoughts were interrupted the next morning by Hermione saying, "Harry look at this."

Reporter Missing

Story by Cheri Mitchell

Famed investigative reporter and writer Rita Skeeter has been reported missing according to Daily Prophet Editor Reggie McDonald. McDonald is quoted as saying, "Ms. Skeeter hasn't been seen since the morning of 15 June, although it's not unusual for her to go missing for a week or more at a time. Skeeter had gone missing for over a month several years ago, so who knows."

McDonald offered a fifty galleon reward for anyone who could provide information about Ms. Skeeter's whereabouts.

Harry snorted a laugh and said, "It doesn't sound like this McDonald bloke is too anxious to get her back."

Hermione looked at him and asked, "Harry, what's so funny?"

Harry replied, "There was a beetle in Director Hammer's office the day that I captured Borgin. Tonks accidentally squished it."

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "You don't suppose?"

Harry nodded and replied, "Right in one. It looks like snooping around like illegally finally caught up with her."

Hermione looked worried and asked, "Oh dear. Did you tell Tonks?"

Harry shook his head and replied, "There's no reason to make her feel bad. What's to be gained by it? Besides, it was probably just a beetle."

Hermione nodded in agreement. "If not, there's one less person to write nasty lies about you, Mr. Potter."

... --- ...

They spent quite a bit of time over the next few days helping prepare for Fleur and Bill's wedding. Bill had found Harry the Wednesday before.

"Harry, I wanted to thank you for the opportunity that you gave me at Gringotts."

Harry smiled, and replied, "Bill, I'm the one who should be thanking you. I wanted to have someone that I knew looking out for me."

Bill nodded and said, "Thanks again. I'm scheduled to start the first of August."

Harry smiled and said, "Let me know how I can help you."

Molly asked, "Did something happen at work, dear?"

Fleur said, "Zey have geeven Bill a beeg promotion. He is to be an account manager for zer beegest London account."

Harry winked at Bill and shook his head slightly.

Mrs. Weasley said, "That's wonderful news, Bill."

Harry decided to go look for gnomes out in the back garden. He didn't want to embarrass Bill. He looked around, worried that the hedges and trees which made the garden perfect for pickup games of Quidditch might make it easy for Death Eaters to sneak in without being seen. Based on his experience grabbing Zabini a few days earlier, Harry concluded that it would be an ideal location for an attacker to hide.

He went to go visit Director Hammer. She recognized the danger, but could only spare a few Aurors for extra security. She had received an anonymous tip that Azkaban would be attacked the afternoon of the 19th.

... --- ...

Riddle had taken young Malfoy's advice and allowed him to plant the misdirection regarding Azkaban. With each fewer Auror on duty at the wedding, the chances for success of his plan increased, and the risk to his Death Eaters dropped. Voldemort realized that he could maximize the impact of his attack if twenty guests were killed without the loss of any Death Eaters or if there was a massacre regardless of his losses.

He couldn't afford a kill ratio below five to one. He simply didn't have enough potential followers, other than dark creatures. Unfortunately the Malfoy boy had been so abusive to the young witches that there was a highly unbalanced ratio of witches and wizard followers among his generation.

The attacks that Bella had led the new recruits on had been mixed at best. There had been no confirmation that any of the Grangers had been killed, and three Death Eaters had been killed in the raid on the muggle deliveryman and his mudblood sons.

Riddle needed a win.

... --- ...

At the Groom's dinner Harry gave Hermione, Molly and Arthur, Ron, Ginny, Emma and Dan the cases with the proceeds of the reward money from the Borgin capture. He gave Bill and Fleur the case that he'd received from the Bulstrode capture. Each of them protested and insisted that he take the gold back. Harry simply said, "I don't need it. I don't want it. You've been my family and I want to share it with you. Will you deny me that?"

Arthur said, "Thank you Harry. Surely there are others who need this more."

Harry said, "I made Minister Scrimgeour take the other half of the gold that he tried to give to me to start the Dale Dawlish memorial Auror fund and also to offer some compensation to Stan Shunpike for false imprisonment."

George said, "So it was you who got him released. We saw him the Leahey Cauldron the other day. I don't think he'll ever smile again."

Harry said, "Maybe you could find something for him to do at the shop. He lost his job with Knight Bus."

Fred said, "I'll find him on Monday and see if he's interested. If not, we'll at least try out our new cheering charm products on him."

... --- ...

The next day was partly cloudy. Molly had finally let Harry bring Dobby and Winky over to help. By noon everything was in place. The florist and other deliverymen that Fleur's wedding planner had made arrangements with were busy setting up their equipment. Many of the guests would begin arriving in a few hours.

... --- ...

Thirty miles to the north, Voldemort was meeting with two hundred Dementors.

... --- ...

A/Ns

Thanks for the e-mails regarding snakes and future direction of the story.

Thanks Steve.

Don't worry, Bob will make his debut in chapter 8.

Who is on the Wizengamot?

Have the Royals been mentioned in any stories? Aug 31, 1997 was a sad day.

Chapter 8

July 19

Harry couldn't explain what made him do it, but he decided to wear his dragonhide vest and pants under his dress robes. It wasn't one of his dreams or visions, but he had an uneasy feeling regarding the wedding. Maybe it was his new responsibilities as head of the Order, or his disappointment after talking with Hammer, but he was nervous.

He also wore Godric's sword in the ceremonial scabbard at his side. Mr. Weasley had asked him to use it as part of the traditional wizard's blessing at the end of the ceremony. As the rightful owner of the heirloom, Harry would walk up to the kneeling couple and tap each of them on their left shoulder. Harry thought the whole ceremony had been vastly overblown through the combined efforts of Molly and Fleur's mother, Riana.

Harry found Hermione talking with her mum and dad. She was wearing an ice blue backless long dress and by any objective assessment looked beautiful.

"Hi Harry," said Emma. "You look very handsome in those robes." He was wearing light wool slate grey robes with crimson trim over his body armor. She saw the slight frown on his face as he looked over to Hermione and quietly asked, "What's wrong?"

Harry fumbled over the words. "Hermione, you look beautiful. I mean your dress looks great, but..." He didn't know how to tell her the things he wanted to say.

Hermione studied Harry's face for a moment and knew that he was trying to say something. She replied, "Tell me what's on your mind, Harry."

"Would you wear your dragon hide armor under some dress robes instead?"

At first offended that Harry didn't like her dress for some reason, Hermione was ready to lay into Harry with some nasty comment.

Then her normal rational thinking took hold and she realized that he'd never say anything to intentionally hurt her feelings. She thought for a moment, trying to interpret what he had really meant.

Harry made eye contact, pulled out the puppy dog eyes and asked, "Please?"

Dan seemed to understand and came to the teens rescue. He asked, "Harry, do you have any extra sets?"

Harry nodded.

Emma said, "If it's OK to borrow them, we all will wear them. Hermione, is that OK with you dear?"

There were tears welled in Hermione's eyes – disappointment, frustration, anxiety, profound respect, and something else. She'd had precious few times to dress up and be a young woman, and hated the costs that the war was inflicting on them on a daily basis. She hated the idea of wearing body armor to a wedding, and knew that it must have hurt Harry to even bring it up. Realizing that he was just being careful, and grateful that he cared, she nodded and said, "I'll go get several sets for Mum and Dad to try on. Thanks Harry."

Harry didn't know exactly how to take her comment, but said nothing. He was disappointed that Director Hammer had refused to assign more Aurors.

"What are these dear?" asked Dan holding up a piece of cord that had been tucked into the pants pocket.

Hermione replied, "They are emergency transportation devices, Dad. If you pull on them twice, they'll instantly transport you to the back garden here. Just leave them in the pocket. They'll be fine."

... --- ...

A few minutes before they were ready to leave, Dan took Harry aside and asked, "how much trouble are you expecting?"

Harry replied, "Any is too much. Trouble seems to find me."

Dan asked, "If you're so certain that there'll be trouble why... never mind, I see your point. If you can't live your life, in a way the other side has already won." Harry nodded. Dan looked at the teen for a moment and asked, "What can I do to help?"

With a pensive look on his face for a moment, Harry replied, "Keep your eyes open, dance with your wife, and daughter, but at the first sign of trouble get them away." Harry thought for a second and said, "I'll be right back." He returned a minute later with the American .45 pistol that Dumbledore had left him.

Dan looked quite surprised and asked, "Harry, where did you get this? Pistols are illegal."

Harry said, "Dumbledore left it for me. It has a special permit. If anything happens, I have millions to hire solicitors with. Better to be safe than sorry. Please?"

"I have practiced with one before. I was in the service for a few years right out of dental school." Dan understood that Harry had his family's best interest at heart and nodded. Harry helped him adjust the shoulder holster.

As Harry was helping Dan with his robes that Hermione had insisted her parents wear after the first discussion, Emma came in and asked, "Are you two ready?"

Dan replied, "As ready as we will ever be. Let's go."

Harry asked, "Should I say something to Ginny?"

Emma asked, "Harry, have you ever been to a wedding before?"

In truth, before this summer, Harry hadn't really been anywhere socially. He shook his head and replied, "No Ma'am."

Glancing at Hermione for a moment and seeing her cautioning look, Emma replied, "The bridesmaids all wear matching formal dresses. It wouldn't do to bring body armor up. I'm sure they'll be careful."

... --- ...

Ginny adjusted her dress for what seemed like the twentieth time in the last hour. She felt eleven again in the strapless gown looking at herself in the mirror after seeing Fleur. Even Gabrielle seemed to fit into her dress better.

"You look lovely dear," said Molly to her daughter. She knew that Ginny would always be petite and loved her just as she was.

Ginny looked at her mum, thankful for the words of encouragement. She tucked her wand into the matching bridesmaid handbag along with the emergency portkey that Harry had insisted that all Order members carry.

... --- ...

Ron was looking through the latest issue of Which Broomstick, deciding whether to order the Firebolt Standard model like Harry had or to go with the DLX model which contained enchanted unbreakable twigs. It was only three hundred galleons more.

The twenty thousand galleons that Harry had given him last night was burning a hole in the teen's pocket. One thousand two hundred galleons did seem like a lot for a broom, but he finally had the opportunity to get something that he really wanted.

Ron ignored the fact that Fred and George had started a highly successful business on about the same amount of gold as his intended purchase. He just wanted it. He wanted to take Hermione out for dinner again and not have to consider the prices on the menu and to have enough muggle notes to pay, no matter where he went.

With his new gold, Ron just knew that Hermione would see him in a better light.

... --- ...

Harry and Tonks visited with the Aurors before the ceremony. They were mostly people that Harry didn't know. Harry noticed one and quietly asked Tonks, "Who's that?" The wizard had sharp eyes, and looked like a man who could take in every detail with just a glance.

She replied, "Bob Sunset. He was in my Auror class. I'll introduce you."

Harry walked over with Tonks who said, "Bob, I'd like you to meet a friend of mine, Harry Potter."

Bob was a bit awestruck, but quickly recovered. "I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Potter sir."

Harry remembered seeing him from the Borgin capture, held out his hand and smiled. "Harry. Just Harry. Please. Do you have everything that you need? It's a big parameter to cover."

Bob looked at Harry and replied, "Yes Sir. Four other Aurors are also on duty."

Harry had previously seen Aurors Hestia Jones, Michael Wood and two others who he didn't recognize wearing their duty Auror robes. He replied, "It was nice to meet you Bob."

Bob nodded in agreement and replied, "Let's hope that the most eventful moment this evening is standing around watching Bill undoing Fleur's garter to give away." They smiled at each other. Harry and Tonks went to find their dates.

... --- ...

Harry found Ginny a few minutes later. He caught himself staring at her hungrily. She looked like a special Christmas gift that was waiting to be unwrapped. The only words that he could manage to get out of his mouth were, "Wow Ginny. You look brilliant. I'd hug and kiss you all afternoon, but I wouldn't know where to start."

More than a bit embarrassed at his words, Ginny replied, "Thanks. You look rather tidy yourself, Mr. Potter. I wouldn't mind unwrapping you later." She no longer felt like a beanpole. Harry was a bit embarrassed at her words, even though he'd had the same thought.

... --- ...

Harry had never seen anything like the ceremony before. Justice Abraxan from the Wizengamot performed the ceremony. Bill looked very handsome in his slate grey robes. Fleur, well Fleur looked as beautiful as any woman could possibly look. She had ivory wedding robes. The gown was backless and somehow seemed to stay on magically. Ron seemed to have caught the full veldt magic blast and nearly made a fool of himself during the ceremony.

After Justice Abraxan had spoken her words and Fleur and Bill had exchanged their actual vows, she nodded at Harry who walked over. Carefully Harry withdrew the extraordinarily sharp weapon from the scabbard. Harry said the words that he'd repeated several dozen times. "Fleur and Bill, may you both enjoy the luck drawn from Godric Gryffindor's own sword." As he gently tapped Fleur and tapped Bill on the shoulder with the flat side of the sword. Several wizarding cameras flashed while Harry was working.

He heard some murmuring as he was saying his words. Harry had come to take the sword for granted, but within the wizarding world, it was virtually a mythical artifact.

After Harry finished, Justice Abraxan walked over, put her hands on Fleur and Bill, then said, "May I introduce for the first time, "Mr. and Mrs. Bill Weasley." Everyone stood and applauded.

... --- ...

After meeting with the dementors, Riddle sent them to the staging area a few miles from Ottery St. Catchpole then called his Death Eaters. While Riddle seemed largely unaffected by the hellish creatures, he knew that the Death Eaters wanted little to do with them.

At the wedding guests were congratulating the new couple, Voldemort was beginning his prep talk, covering the final plans. "Wormtail tells me that by a stroke of luck, Scrimgeour, Hammer, and Potter are all at the same table. This will allow you to cast your killing curses from a greater distance. Should you miss one target, you will likely hit one of the others. Bella will cast the first spell. Do nothing until she has fired. The only thing that can go wrong with this plan is if the targets are alerted and have time to scatter. Don't let that happen." Voldemort walked around the inside perimeter of the circle that the Death Eaters had made looking at his servants, sensing varying amounts of fear or confidence.

He continued. "After you have fired your first killing curse, you may target anyone that you wish. The Dementors should appear within a minute. After they have arrived, apparate back here. Do not stay and engage the targets. The Dementors will begin feeding and finish your work for you."

Malfoy's robes hid the extreme excitement that the young man felt at the Dark Lord's words.

Riddle continued, "Wormtail, stay a few minutes and assess the damage that the dementors are able to inflict." The balding man with the silver hand nodded, largely out of fear.

Riddle concluded, saying "By this time tomorrow, we will have freed our other faithful servants and brought the Ministry to its knees. Do not fail me."

... --- ...

Mrs. Weasley had lined Harry up in the wedding party receiving line and had him stand between Ginny and Ron. Harry truly wished to avoid the extra attention, but saw no way out of it without seriously hurting her feelings. People started coming up and spent as much time talking with him as Bill and Fleur in spite of Harry's attempt at moving them along. Harry grew increasingly annoyed as almost every set of eyes flicked up to his forehead as they passed by. Several exceptionally rude people went so far as to ask for an autograph,

which Harry politely refused and moved them along. Ginny whispered, "I'm sorry Harry. Thanks for doing this for my mum."

Harry smiled at her, and his anger immediately vanished.

Minister Scrimgeour was next to greet Harry. "Congratulations again on stopping those two Death Eaters three weeks ago. It turned out that Death Eater Thomas Morte had been wanted for three murders including Director Bones. The Ministry is truly in your debt for stopping this killer."

Embarrassed, Harry replied, "You've already done more than was needed, Minister. I was only doing what needed to be done. This is Bill's sister Ginny and her brother Ron."

Scrimgeour nodded absently, and replied, "It's a pleasure, Miss Weasley. Hello Tom," and walked by.

As Harry was greeting the next person in line, Ron was silently steaming. 'Harry's always the hero. I coulda hit some bloke with a Reducto charm and gotten a pile of reward money. You don't need a scar to hit someone. I could do it too. Minister Scrimgeour didn't even remember my name. He's just like Slughorn, always playing favorites.'

In Harry's mind, the line seemed to go on forever. He was glad that he was near the end of the receiving line. Ginny tried to give him a playful pinch on the rear and feeling his body armor gave him a questioning look.

He returned her look with a grim expression and nodded. The look on her face changed in turn from questioning to surprise to understanding and she nodded back.

... --- ...

After the guests had moved through the reception line and everyone had enjoyed a beverage or two, Harry had a chance to look around. The back garden was decorated with thirty-two tables that each held ten people. Harry noticed that there were little name cards on each of

the tables. Apparently Molly and Fleur had spent countless hours deciding who needed to eat with whom. There wasn't a head table common with muggle wedding receptions. Several of the tables had a person or two from the wedding party.

Harry felt quite self-conscious walking around with the Godric Gryffindor sword in a scabbard tied to a crimson sash around his waist, but some things couldn't be helped. Mr. Weasley had beamed at him when he'd used it to give Fleur and Bill a tap for luck.

Ginny found Harry getting swarmed by Gabrielle and a half dozen of her friends. Seeing her, Harry gave a relieved look, and politely excused himself. "Thanks. They were being ridiculous."

Ginny replied, "That's what I'm here for." She slid under his arm. Harry was very aware of all of that bare skin, and careful not to slide her gown up or down. Ginny said, "We're at this table. Should we sit down?"

Harry thought he'd be much more comfortable sitting and replied, "Thanks."

Remus, Tonks, Hannah Abbot and Susan Bones were sitting at the table already. Harry glanced at the other name cards. Cards for Kingsley Shacklebolt and Director Connie Hammer were next to Ginny. Cards for Louise Scrimgeour and Minister Rufus Scrimgeour were next to Harry.

"Hi Hannah, hi Susan. You both look really nice. It's good to see you again." Harry didn't ask 'How have you been,' as they had lost their parents and guardian respectively. He would talk with them later and ask how they were doing. Hannah had been staying with Susan for the Holiday. Neither was comfortable living alone.

Tonks had talked Remus into getting some new dress robes. Ginny smiled at Tonks, who said, "He does clean up rather nicely, doesn't he?" Remus looked about as self-conscious as Harry felt.

Harry glanced at the next table over and saw, Dan, Emma, Hermione, Ron, Charlie, his girlfriend, and four people who seemed to know

Charlie. They all seemed to be the outdoors type, deeply tanned and if possible, even less comfortable than Harry in dress robes. Charlie was talking animatedly with Hermione's parents soaring his hands, apparently describing how a dragon glides.

The table on the other side of Harry had Fred with Angelina, George with Alyx, and some other family friends that Harry didn't recognize. George seemed to be very attentive to every thing that the pretty young Auror Cadet had to say.

After the food arrived, Charlie stood to make the toast. "Bill, Fleur, everyone here wishes you both a lifetime of happiness, health and prosperity. We wish you a family of your own and a lifetime of peace." As the couple kissed, everyone raised their glasses.

The dinner was fantastic. The guests had a choice of a roasted beef and baby potatoes, or Atlantic cod with garlic potatoes and French cut beans. There were carts of cakes and fancy breads. Everything looked great.

At Harry's table Minister Scrimgeour said, "Susan, I was telling Harry that he had stopped the Death Eater who was responsible for your aunt, Amelia's..."

Mrs. Scrimgeour whacked her husband on the arm and said, "Really Rufus, this isn't the time or the place for such a conversation. Save it for another day." She gave him a look that indicated that she clearly meant business.

Fleur's sister, Gabrielle stood to make the second toast. Though she spoke slowly, her English was nearly flawless. "Fleur, I think that you have found the perfect partner in Mr. Bill Weasley. You like each other as friends, as partners, and as lovers. Bill, I hope that my mother and I can make you feel as much a part of our family as you parents, brothers and sister have made Fleur feel in yours... Oh, no..." The young woman pointed a second before the first spells were launched.

... --- ...

The forty-five Death Eaters had moved into position by walking the last mile to the woods that edged up to the Weasley property. Moments before, Bella had modified the instructions slightly. "Get Scrimgeour and Hammer first." There were thick hedgerows on either side of the property and the front was effectively blocked off with serving carts, and the raised platform that had been set up for the wizarding dance band, The Charmers. Their equipment filled the platform.

Standing on the platform while delivering her toast, little Gabrielle had seen the Death Eaters emerge from the edge of the woods and managed to give everyone a two second warning.

"Oh no." Gabrielle saw the wands being pointed a second before the jets of green light began to fly.

With one fluid movement, Harry dove from his chair, dragging Ginny and Director Hammer to the ground with him. A dozen Quidditch matches and countless hours practicing had sharpened his already quick reflexes. A second later, Harry completed his lunge knocking Hermione and her parents off of their chairs and overturning their table.

Feet away from where he was originally sitting, Rufus Scrimgeour's life ended along with his wife as they were hit with a combined twenty-six Avada Kedavra curses. As Harry was accidentally groping Emma Granger, Tonks had pushed her lover to the ground, knocking Susan Bones down with her. Sitting nearly behind the Minister, Hannah Abbot was hit with eight killing curses that had missed their original target.

The next ten seconds was pandemonium. Within moments of the first jets of light the Death Eaters made a running charge for the hundred feet or so that separated them and the closest tables. In the five seconds that it took the Death Eaters to reenact the charge of the Light Brigade, most of the witches and wizards had whipped out their wands and begun firing back.

“Stay down,” Harry hissed at Ginny as he stood to defend his loved ones. “Reducto, Reducto.” Two idiots fell over. They would be dead within a minute.

Bella had found the table in an attempt to get Hammer and Potter. “Avada Ka...”

BANG!

The Sperry made .45 service pistol had not had a round fired in the last fifty-two years, but still functioned flawlessly. There was a small hole in the front of Lestrangle’s forehead. The back side was missing.

Hammer and Harry nodded at the enraged Dentist, as they each pointed to another target and fired.

... --- ...

For some inexplicable reason, Sybil Trelawney had always been one of Bill’s favorite professors. She had been delighted to receive an invitation to the wizarding wedding of the summer. In reality, she had very few friends and had always counted herself fortunate that the good-looking red headed man had chosen to remain friends with her after leaving school. Apparently her ability to predict the future failed her, as she was quite surprised when the purple slash hit her across the chest. She died moments later with her bottle thick glasses lying beside her.

... --- ...

Hermione fired a stunner and dropped a Death Eater. He fell stunned next to her mum.

Not to be outdone, Ron saw a Death Eater behind Tonks and fired, “Reducto.” Unfortunately his blast was poorly aimed and hit Ministry Director of Magical Law Enforcement Connie Hammer squarely in the chest.

“Oh no,” cried Hermione who had seen Ron hit Hammer. Tonks made a vain attempt to stop the massive bleeding and to keep her boss breathing.

Remus fired and dropped a Death Eater. Next to him Fleur parent’s best friends Shawn and Shauna Lumeine lay bleeding badly, hit by cutting hexes.

... --- ...

Charlie noticed something was wrong when Harry dove off the table, protecting his little sister and the others in the process. He was closest to Fleur at the time and did the same with his new sister-in-law. Seconds later a dimwitted Death Eater made a charge at Fleur. Charlie demonstrated a flame-cutting spell on the Death Eater that he had used many times with his dragon-keeping job. Apparently the Death Eater was impressed by it. He spent the remainder of his life contemplating its effectiveness. Feet away, Bill nodded in appreciation.

... --- ...

Hagrid, the normally gentle man saw the Death Eaters kill one of the people at his table. Lisa LeRone from Beauxbatons had been at Hogwarts during the Tri-Wizard tournament and had come to know Hagrid. As he saw her slumped head first at the table, rage filled the man. He got up, and ran at the attacking Death Eater picked her up and threw her against the trunk of a nearby tree snapping both her back and the tree in the process. Hagrid went back and picked up Fleur’s friend looking in vain for somewhere to take her to get help.

... --- ...

Molly Weasley was outraged. Her son’s wedding was ruined and she wouldn’t let these hooligans get away with it. She stunned the first Death Eater who came close to her, ran up to her and kicked the helpless woman over and over, beating her into a broken mass of black robes and a bloodied mask.

... --- ...

Within twenty seconds, thirty-four of the Death Eaters were dead, seriously wounded or had been stunned. It looked like a rout for the light side until the first chill hit the air. Behind the bandstand, someone screamed, "Dementors." As Riddle had planned, everyone's attention had been so focused on the Death Eaters that the dementors were nearly upon them before anyone noticed. An unholy chill filled the air.

... --- ...

At that instant the remaining Death Eaters decided that it was time to leave and take their chances with an enraged Dark Lord. Ten Death Eaters managed to use their portkeys and leave a certain fate for an uncertain one.

... --- ...

Auror Michael Wood was the first casualty of the dementors. Surrounded by a dozen, he had thoughts of his parents' murder at the hands of Death Eaters. Unlike the Order members, he didn't have an emergency portkey. The twelve foot dementor picked up the unconscious Auror and set him down ten seconds later before moving on to its next victim.

... --- ...

Blood was everywhere as Harry hurriedly checked on Ginny and the Grangers. Harry didn't see his best buddy Ron getting stunned and manacled by the young Auror Bob Sunset.

Harry stood up and yelled, "Use your Patronus charms. Expecto Patronum." A beautiful silver stag flew from his wand and began charging the Dementors fifty feet away. Other people stood to cast their forms. Unfortunately few were able to. With the horror of so many dementors so close by, most of those who knew the charm were unable to cast anything more than a silver formless mist from their wands. Dozens of people were on the ground retching from the bad feelings.

... --- ...

Percy had insisted in believing Hammer's assessment that there was a low risk of attack at the wedding. Like Hermione, he had a blindness when it came to the decisions made by his superiors. His last worldly thought as he was being lifted up by a pair of rotting hands was that he'd failed his first boss, Barty crouch. Holding Percy by the neck, legs kicking wildly, the creature raised its hood with the other hand revealing a dead looking face. There was nothing where its eyes should have been. The only discernable feature was a large toothless mouth. With a great intake of breath from the twelve-foot dementor, Percy's soul was irresistibly pulled from him and he knew no more.

... --- ...

Someone ran into Harry knocked him over and accidentally knocked his wand out of his hand in the process. Harry searched in vain. The dementors began circling, apparently focused on his area. The fuzzy white noise of his mother screaming in the moments before her death returned with concert volume and crystal clarity.

As one of the vile creatures put its long fingered decaying hands on Harry's forehead, Harry pulled the sword from the scabbard and plunged it into the dementor's throat. The foul dementor let out a last unholy scream and vanished in a blast of grainy dust and muck leaving Harry covered in a black cloak and putrid slime.

Realizing that he wasn't dead yet, Harry got up and lunged his sword into the next nearest dementor, then another. Within thirty seconds the crazed teen had felled a dozen of the foul creatures. Harry would later learn that in the recorded history of wizarding, no one had ever killed off a dementor before.

"Harry!"

Hermione screamed as the evil creatures had picked up her mum and Ginny. Hermione tried, but has unable to get more than a wisp of vapor from her wand.

BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG! Dan emptied Harry's pistol at the creature that was about to feed on his wife. Unfortunately the copper slugs had no discernable effect on the dementor. He watched in horror as the monster raised his best friend to its mouth.

Turning his attention to the sound of the pistol Harry charged the dementor. "Gryffindor!" cried, Harry as he pierced the unholy creature with the relic sword. Moments later, Emma was covered in the creature's empty cloak.

... --- ...

Ginny was lying on the ground with her eyes unfocused when Harry felled the beast that had previously been holding her. As she was hidden beneath the massive cloak, Harry hadn't noticed her lying there in all of the confusion.

... --- ...

Alyx saw the raven-haired wizard running around waving the sword like a madman. One of the few people standing, she was able to cast a Patronus at the dementors, one of the only forms that materialized in the last minute. It drove some of the dementors away at least momentarily.

Harry yelled "Patronus charms," and several people seemed to wake out of their stupor. Moments later, a half dozen forms emerged. Between the Patronus forms and the wizard who had felled over twenty of their number, the remaining dementors glided away.

Five minutes after Gabrielle had uttered the words, "Oh no," Harry looked out at the once beautifully decorated back garden. Instead of a wedding planner's pride, Harry saw thirty overturned tables, and a sea of dead, soul-less, wounded and dazed witches, wizards and Death Eaters.

He slumped to the ground and wept.

... --- ...

A/N

Thanks Steve.

How could Harry get Ron out of very serious trouble?

Has anyone read a story that had a great funeral/memorial scene?

Thanks for taking the time to review.

Chapter 9

The Teen Witch Weekly magazine had not put out a double issue since November 1981. By chance, Saturday midnight was the content submission deadline for the issue that was to be published on Sunday afternoon.

The young reporter, Alicia Spinnet, assigned to cover the wedding had been instructed to get a few pictures of the pretty bride. In all she had taken twenty-four exclusive photographs. The first dozen were typical wedding photos – A blushing bride, the wedding party, several shots of Harry performing the blessing with Gryffindor's sword, the reception line and the two toasts being given. Alicia knew most of the Weasleys from years of Quidditch games and was on good terms with Molly and Arthur.

The next few photos were hurriedly taken shots of the forty-five Death Eaters in a line, a morbid shot of Mr. And Mrs. Scrimgeour slumped onto the table, an amazing photo of Bellatrix collapsing and several photos of the dementors. There was an incredible shot of Harry stabbing one of the hideous creatures. In the background, Tonks could be seen desperately trying to save Director Hammer.

The final few photos showed dozens of Mediwitches and Medi wizards on the scene while other workers were carrying bodies out.

The final photo on the roll showed an astonished Department of Mysteries employee holding up an empty dementor cloak.

Alicia returned to her office at 10PM after talking with several witnesses and being interviewed by Senior Auror Nick Straighthand. She began writing her story. She had known many of the witches and wizards who had been killed and had unfortunately witnessed several of the murders from just feet away. Alicia, a rather tall, willowy blond witch with a good heart, had helped comfort some of the wounded as best as she could.

She was in tears as she heard Arthur Weasley tell the Daily Prophet reporter about helplessly watching Percy succumb to the dementor, only to be interrupted by Molly's cry that the same had happened to

little Ginny. Alicia remembered Ginny from Harry's DA club in her last year at Hogwarts.

At 2AM she filed her story. Teen Witch Weekly editor Ericka Turnbull immediately gave Spinnet a bonus equal to two years of her salary for the story and photos, and ordered a triple printing of the issue. Alicia celebrated by going back to her flat, still wearing her blood stained robes, and drinking herself into an uneasy dream filled slumber. She had heard stories from Harry's dorm mates about his horrible nightmares. Tonight she had lived one and never wanted another. At Senior Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt's specific request, she omitted any mention of the specifics regarding Lestrangle's death.

Chills ran down her spine when she recalled the dementors and the sight of Harry doing everything that he could to prevent a total annihilation of the wedding party. She was fully aware that if they had been left to feed just another few minutes, everyone there would have been kissed.

Approximately half of the survivors had been taken to the Hogwarts Hospital wing while the others had been rushed to St. Mungo's.

Of the three hundred twenty wedding guests, the Death Eaters had killed thirty-one. The dementors had kissed seventy and another seventy-five had been seriously injured.

... --- ...

As Alicia was writing her story and every wizarding law enforcement official in Britain was either at the holding cells, the Weasley property, or Azkaban, Voldemort made his final move of the evening. He and the ten remaining Death Eaters had apparated to the ferry site in Southerland closest to the North Sea island of Azkaban. Snape and Malfoy quickly murdered the two guards stationed in the mainland and they took the ferryboat to Azkaban Island. Voldemort personally murdered eight of the twelve guards while the others began opening the cells to search for the other Death Eaters. As he had predicted some of the Azkaban guards had been recalled to help at the Ministry in London, and the fortress was nearly empty.

In total Riddle lost thirty-eight Death Eaters that night, but had managed to liberate eight inmates back from Azkaban. He lost a few novice Death Eaters and two of the convicts in the raid, but in all objectivity had improved his hand. In a cruel move, he left one guard at the prison alive, bound in a body-binding spell with his hands cut off and cauterized.

The terrified guard looked into Voldemort's face expecting to be killed or further tortured. Riddle looked into the man's eyes as he voided himself and said, "Tell Potter that he's next."

... --- ...

Alastor Moody felt like he had somehow failed his friends and colleagues. Hammer had recruited him to work a shift at the Ministry holding cells to allow several of the younger Aurors to attend the wedding. The knarred Master Auror (ret) didn't mind helping out, but never wanted to miss a well-cooked free meal either. Hammer had personally promised to bring him back a take away meal.

At 8:30 PM word had reached the Ministry that a massive attack had taken place at the wedding. The fight was over before they had been notified, but the first call contained frantic pleas for assistance from Auror Hestia Jones to send "All of the healers."

Fifteen minutes later, fifteen Death Eaters were transported to the holding cells. Moody took no chances and personally restunned each of the prisoners. The job of stripping the prisoners, searching them, cataloging their belongings and placing them in a holding cell was time consuming. Several of the prisoners were seriously wounded when they were brought in.

Moody (apparently) failed to notice their injuries. As such, three of the Death Eaters were dead before their turn came up to be examined.

... --- ...

If Moody felt like a failure, Harry felt a hundred times worse. In the course of five minutes, his best friend had killed the Director of

Magical law Enforcement and Ginny had had her soul... he couldn't bear to think about it.

He cursed himself a thousand times for not bringing a second wand along.

He allowed himself to be transported to Hogwarts with the other wounded. Once there, the adrenaline burned off, total exhaustion caught up with him and he slumped onto the stone floor and fell into an unconscious slumber.

... --- ...

As Moody was tending to the prisoners, Wizengamot Elder Tiberius Ogden, called an informal, emergency meeting of the Ministry department heads. At the beginning of the day there had been fifteen department heads. In the event of a call of no confidence or the death of a seated Minister of Magic, the department heads would nominate a candidate for the next Minister. That person would be voted on by the combined vote of the department heads and the fifty members of the Wizengamot. Given the deaths of Director Hammer and Thomas Perkins, Arthur's previous workmate, there were only thirteen heads. With Arthur indisposed there were only twelve.

There were only two candidates seriously considered to replace Scrimgeour. Kingsley Shacklebolt was considered a highly competent Senior Auror, and was certainly believed competent to be a wartime Minister or Director of the Magical Law Enforcement group originally headed by Amelia Bones then briefly by Connie Hammer. Scrimgeour had assigned Shacklebolt to be special assistant to the PM, either to sideline a potential rival or provide the best possible bodyguard to the PM.

Natasha Abraxan, one of the younger Wizengamot justices, was also considered extremely competent. A Druid High Priestess, she had a keen mind, skilled hands as a conjurer and was famed at transfiguring metals. Stunningly beautiful, she rarely was unable to convince others to see her side of a debate.

As the discussion wore on everyone agreed that Justice Abraxan had the fire to recover from the evening's murders and lead the British wizarding world through the current crisis. By midnight the High Priestess had been briefed and had accepted the nomination that would be put to the vote the next day.

In the event that Abraxan was nominated, she would nominate a replacement to the Wizengamot and appoint a replacement for Hammer's position. The full Wizengamot would ratify her nomination. If elected, she would be sworn in no later than Monday morning.

... --- ...

Back at Hogwarts, Poppy was taxed to the limit. Thirty of the wounded had been portkeyed to the Hogwarts hospital wing and the rest to St. Mungo's. Fortunately St. Mungo's sent the Master Healer several Mediwitches on loan. At the moment, St. Mungo's had more staff than beds available. Poppy was happy to see the former Hogwarts students again and was grateful for the help. Within an hour, everyone that was wounded had been examined, treated, and assigned a bed.

... --- ...

Sunday morning Justice Abraxan was easily elected Minister of Magic and immediately sworn in rather than waiting a day. At that point, the job seemed like an insurmountable challenge. One task had been made simpler. With the sacking of Azkaban, each of the captured Death Eaters was tried, convicted of murder and quietly sent through the veil. Motivated justice within the wizarding world tended to be very swift. The death sentences wouldn't be announced for several weeks.

... --- ...

Molly Weasley's happy world had literally collapsed on Saturday. Within ten minutes of Gabrielle's toast, she had lost two of her children and appeared to be on the verge of losing a third. Ron had been portkeyed to the holding cells with the fifteen Death Eaters.

She had been in absolute disbelief when she heard that he had been charged with killing MLE Director Hammer. More than ever, she longed for the calming influence of Professor Dumbledore.

“Arthur, what can we do?” She was certain that her husband would have an idea. He had been her rock for many years.

Doing his best with the little that he had to work with, Arthur replied, “We’ll get some news from Moody or Harry.”

Molly didn’t want answers. She wanted her children back, and replied, “Arthur, Harry can’t help us.”

Holding firm, Arthur replied “He’ll think of something. Remember Minister Scrimgeour and Director Hammer were sitting at his table, not the other way around. Mad Eye will have the latest news.”

“But Percy and Ginny...”

“Are better off now. You know that we made the only decision that we could allowing them to be euthanized. I’m so sorry, Molly. They were good children. They were good people. I just wish...” He broke down and began sobbing into his best friend’s arms. Even rocks sometimes cry.

... --- ...

One of Lucius Malfoy’s first actions as an escaped convict had been to send a parchment marked with a drop of his own blood to the head goblin demanding a replacement key to his trust account vault and a moneybag that would allow him to access the vault’s funds without physically having to visit the bank

Malfoy knew that this would be difficult because one or more of the Death Eaters apparently confused the meaning of Voldemort’s message regarding the goblins – “Under no circumstances are they to be targeted.” Two of the Head Goblin’s sons had been killed by overzealous Death Eaters. As such, there was no way that Lucius Malfoy would ever see as much as a knut of the holdings in any of his vaults. Fortunately for the two Death Eaters involved, they had been

killed by the wedding guests and allowed to die a quick death. Being the arrogant bully that he was Lucius never considered that the Gringotts goblins would stand in his way.

Malfoy had been somewhat surprised to receive a return owl within an hour. He untied the box and the owl quickly flew off. He opened the carefully wrapped box, picked up the parchment and spat as he read the brief message signed by Gringotts Managing Director Ragnok. "Bite me."

Lucius was smart enough to realize that Draco would have no better luck attempting to access the family vault, and realized that at the moment, he was unable to physically access the vaults, or sell any of his property because the deeds were in his vault, or access them remotely. Effectively he was penniless.

... --- ...

By Sunday evening Harry still hadn't woken up. Many of the other patients had already been treated and released. Hermione and her dad were shuttling between the bed that had been set for Emma and the bed that Poppy had reserved for Harry. Emma had been given a dreamless sleep potion and a calming draft. She had come in with some cuts on her forehead from hitting a chair after having been released from the dying dementor and was seriously shaken up. The standard remedy of chocolate seemed to have no effect on her, so she slept.

Poppy had found a set of clean clothing for Dan and suggested that he shower and change. Dan had left his dragon hide and other clothing outside and Poppy came by to pick it up. She noticed the large gash on the back of the thick vest. When Dan got out of the bathroom, Poppy said, "Dr. Granger, would you mind if I took a look at your back for a moment?"

Dan replied, "Not a bit. It does feel a bit stiff." She took him to one of the tables, and asked him to remove his shirt. When she came back a moment later and examined his back she was shocked. There was a faint purple mark from his left shoulder blade to his right hip. She had last seen such a mark on his daughter and realized that he was

extremely lucky to be alive. Poppy said, "Dr. Granger would you mind if Hermione had a look at this?"

"Go ahead," replied Dan, a bit perplexed that Hermione would have anything to say about his sore back.

Hermione gasped as she saw the faint mark, knowing that her dad had been shielded from the same curse that had almost killed her a year ago. Unexpectedly she hugged him for a minute then asked, "May I see the vest?"

Poppy showed it to her. There was a burn mark etched almost all the way through the thick dragon hide.

Dan asked, "What's wrong?"

Poppy replied, "Dr. Granger, you have a very good friend in Mr. Potter. His vest protected you from a most painful death. The curse that you had been hit with would have acted like a welding torch as it went through your body. She showed him the back of the vest again and he understood.

She said, "Let me apply a salve for that mark. It should clear up within minutes. Were you injured anywhere else?"

Amazed at his luck, Dan replied, "I don't believe so. Thank you very much. How can I pay you?"

Poppy shook her head, smiled and replied, "Perhaps you can assist Mr. Potter sometime in the future. You may get dressed in twenty minutes. You'll be fine. One of the elves will bring your clothing back for you."

As he sat on the chair waiting just minutes for the burn to heal, Dan quipped, "Sure beats doing root canals."

... --- ...

Monday's Daily Prophet was full of information. Sitting between her parents, grieving, Hermione studied the paper. The headline read;

Weasley – Delacour wedding attacked

The wedding of the summer was ruined by a full-scale attack Saturday evening as Voldemort's supporters, known as Death Eaters staged a cowardly attack at the wedding of Miss Fleur Delacour and Mr. Bill Weasley. At 8:00 PM, 45 Death Eaters launched an organized attack that led to the deaths of Minister Rufus Scrimgeour, MLE Director Connie Hammer and 29 others. The attack was countered quite effectively by the wedding guests until a second attack by a reported 200 dementors brought fear onto the group.

Bridegroom Bill Weasley was quoted as saying, "My brother Charlie saved my wife Fleur from certain death. I'll never be able to repay him."

There were many heroes that evening. Susan Bones who was at the table with Minister Scrimgeour reported that MLE Auror Nymphadora Tonks made a desperate attempt to save the life of Director Hammer while under heavy attack from the Death Eaters and dementors.

Miss Bones was quoted as saying, "We were all sitting at the table. Harry (Potter) saw something and got as many of us to safety as he could. He saved Director Hammer's life and the life of Ginny Weasley. A split second later the Scrimgeours and Hanna (Abbott) were murdered over and over. It felt like it would never end. I was so scared, I couldn't even move. A second later, Harry pulled me down and helped the people at the next table."

Ragnok, Head Goblin at Gringotts was quoted saying, "Tom Riddle's (Voldemort) followers have proven themselves to be indiscriminate cowardly killers. His known assets will be confiscated." Two of Ragnok's sons who were attending the wedding were murdered by Voldemort's Death Eaters.

It was an evening where many ordinary witches and wizards decided to stand up for themselves. Lee Jordan was quoted saying, "I could never face Voldemort myself, but the Death Eaters are just punks in masks. I saw one (unnamed) witch take down a Death Eater and beat her to a pulp."

Hermione gave a small smile knowing that Lee had referred to Mrs. Weasley. She continued reading.

The 200 Dementors had never been assembled in a coordinated attack against the wizarding world since the 1627 treaty establishing the dementors as guardians of Azkaban Fortress used for 370 years to house Britain's wizarding convicts. The dementors kissed 70 witches and wizards without provocation.

As that was happening Harry Potter decided to take extraordinary action. MLE Auror Cadet Alex witnessed Potter single handedly slay twenty-two of the dementors causing the others to beat a hasty retreat. Alyx was quoted saying, "Mr. Potter led the counterattack against the Death Eaters and those monsters. The survivors all owe their lives to Mr. Potter." The exact method that Mr. Potter used to slay the dementors was not disclosed. Mr. Potter could not be reached for comment. He had been taken to Hogwarts for treatment of a case of exhaustion.

Arthur Weasley, Ministry department head was quoted saying "It was a tragic evening. I wish to express my condolences to Fleur's family as well as the families of all who lost loved ones. I am equally certain that ordinary witches and wizards will be heartened by the knowledge that it is possible to fight back and win against those cowards who hide behind masks and call themselves Death Eaters.

Hermione scanned the list of the dead and wounded with tears silently running down her face, splashing on the pages. She let out a sob as she saw Ginny's name listed. She would miss her best girlfriend. She would also miss Hanna and all of the others. Turning the page she saw several articles on the other pages.

Justice Abraxan elected MoM

High Priestess Natasha Abraxan was unanimously elected Minister of Magic on Sunday Morning. Abraxan was sworn in early Sunday afternoon in a private ceremony. The editors and staff of the Daily Prophet wish Minister Abraxan much success in her new position. Abraxan's credentials on page 17.

Straighthand appointed Director

Minister Abraxan appointed Senior Auror Nick Straighthand Director of Magical Law Enforcement. Straighthand was a surprise choice. Most insiders expected that Senior Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt would receive the tip. When asked, Minister Abraxan replied, "I have the highest respect for Senior Auror Shacklebolt. He currently is on an assignment of the utmost importance to the crown." Nick Straighthand vowed to continue the aggressive stance against the Death Eaters and was quoted saying, "We will hunt them down like the dogs that they are and rid Britain of them."

When asked to comment on the fact that he hasn't made a felony arrest in the last four years, Straighthand pointed out that "Supply is an important area too. Earlier in my career, I made three felony arrests - two of which resulted in convictions, fines and the return of the stolen robes. The other was use of inappropriate charms on goats and was dismissed."

Straighthand said, "Citizens are urged to continue to do what they can to protect themselves. I applaud Harry Potter and the others who did what was needed to protect themselves and others Saturday evening. The Death Eaters are apparently not invincible, although I have never faced one, and do not know that for a fact."

The staff and Editors of the Daily Prophet wish Director Straighthand much, much luck and success in his new position.

"He'll need it," muttered Hermione. "Stan Shunpike might have been a better choice. There hasn't been a rash of Death Eater shoplifting, but if there is, it sounds like he'll be right on top of it. Don't any of the Aurors have military experience?" Another story caught her eye.

Skeeter still missing

Former Daily Prophet and freelance reporter is still missing. Daily Prophet Editor Reggie McDonald was quoted as saying "Rita hasn't been in the office in five weeks. We have cancelled her employment

agreement and withdrawn the fifty galleons reward for information about her whereabouts.”

McDonald refused to speculate regarding Ms. Skeeter’s whereabouts.

‘At least she won’t be bugging Harry anymore,’ thought Hermione as she continued to wipe tears from her face. Finally she was shocked to see a quarter page article on the back page.

Azkaban Fortress breached again. Sixteen killed as eight prisoners escape.

At ten PM on Saturday evening, Voldemort and ten Death Eaters led an attack on the venerable prison freeing eight convicted prisoners. The escaped convicts were identified as, Lucius Malfoy, Rabastan Lestranger, Antonin Dolohov, Thomas Nott, Thomas Crabbe, Luis Mulciber, Vincent Crabbe, and Greg Goyle.

Remarkably, Voldemort left a witness to the event. Auror Scott McDonald was immediately transported to St. Mungo's. No other statement was issued.

“Great,” muttered Hermione. “They keep getting sent to prison and keep breaking out.” She finished reading the article.

People with any information regarding the escaped convicts are encouraged to contact Ministry Director Straighthand immediately.

“Let’s go back and see how Harry is doing,” said Hermione with increased resolve. They finished their dinner and went back to the hospital wing.

... --- ...

Harry was being treated for a high fever, but nothing that Healer Pomfrey was doing seemed to make any difference. He had been thrashing in his sleep as if fighting some sort of silent battle for over thirty hours now.

Harry saw an image of his Dad and his mum walking to greet someone. He recognized her as Ginny, but she seemed older, in her early twenties like his Dad. They came closer to him and finally the Ginny image spoke.

"Let me go, Harry. Don't you dare blame yourself. I got separated from the group that day. It was my time."

"No, my fault," muttered Harry."

"Harry, I'm with your parents now. When you killed the dementor that got me, all of the souls that it had taken were freed. I'm happy now, Harry... Please Harry... I need to go. Promise me Harry... Kill that bastard, marry a nice witch and raise lots of green-eyed babies for me. I'll always love you... Goodbye Harry." Her image faded.

Poppy was worried. His fever hadn't let up and Harry looked like he was in a struggle from the way that his arms were flailing and his legs were kicking. He was muttering something, "...sorry...don't go...love you...I'll try...bye..." He was dehydrated and obviously delirious. She did her best to carefully force some fluids down his throat, but he wouldn't hold still.

Another image came to Harry. It was Dumbledore, the younger Dumbledore that Harry had seen in the pensive. He said, "I'm extremely proud of you Harry. You saved many people that day and found what you must ultimately do... Look at memories in the pensive again. Your answer is there. We love you, Harry."

Harry calmed down. For several hours his body remained motionless as he made little moaning sounds. Finally Dan could see his hand twitch. Emma and Hermione were awake, resting in the next beds. Dan got up from the chair and they both came over to see how Harry was doing.

Two minutes later Harry woke up. Seeing the movement, Poppy scurried over and shooed everyone away over their persistent protests. She took out her wand to examine her favorite patient and found nothing seriously wrong with him. She straightened his covers,

patted him on the shoulder, and said, "It's late. Try and get some rest Mr. Potter. Your friends will see you in the morning."

... --- ...

Meanwhile at the Ministry holding cells, Ron was terrified. He had watched the guards take the Death Eaters away. As they were being led away, one had seen him in the cell and said, "Thanks Weasley. You did our work for us."

Several hours later, the guards had come back talking about how the Death Eaters had all been tried, convicted, and sent through the veil. He doubted that his dad could do anything on his behalf and waited his turn. He hadn't been allowed any visitors.

While the Aurors guarding the holding cells may have normally shown Ron some pity, his causing the death of one of their own left them with nothing but contempt for the lanky teen. The fact that Hammer had been quite popular with the rank and file only worsened his chances. He shivered on the cement floor under the thin blanket and awaited his fate.

... --- ...

Handing out the moneybags, Voldemort looked at the smaller, but more competent group that had encircled him. "You have done well this week. The new Minister will prove less of a nuisance than Scrimgeour. We will continue recruiting. Those that refuse will be killed or put under the Imperious curse to do our bidding."

There were murmurs of approval from the Death Eaters. Each of them was in favor of indirect fighting rather than another set place battle.

He looked at them again and said, "Who can tell me about Bella?"

... --- ...

A/Ns

Thanks to the people who reviewed or sent e-mails.

Will Molly and Arthur stay in the Order?

If you haven't read it, *Sunset over Britain* is a fantastic work in progress. *Make a Wish* is another very fun story.

Thanks Steve.

Chapter 10

When he woke up, Harry was alone in the hospital wing. He opened the letter that was on the nightstand and looked at it carefully.

Dear Harry,

With your permission, we would like to join the Order of the Phoenix, which we believe that you are now leading. We have different skills than some, and may not be the best fighters in Britain, but we would like to help as we can, and believe that you can make use of us.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan Bones

Ernie McMillian

Lavender Brown

Justin Finch-Fletchley

Roger Davies

Lee Jordan

Padma Patil

Parvati Patil

Ernie Prang

Rolanda Hooch

Pomona Sprout

Cynthia Vector

Harry couldn't believe his eyes. He had completely failed the girl that he loved, allowed scores of people to get killed, and for some

unfathomable reason, twelve people had just signed up to follow him into danger. Why?

Harry put the letter back in the envelope and sat up. Poppy had laid out some clean clothing for him. She walked back and noticed him sitting up. "Good morning, Mr. Potter. You look much better today."

Harry asked his usual question upon waking up in the hospital wing. "How long have I been here?"

Poppy smiled at him and gave his shoulder a small squeeze. She replied, "About thirty-seven hours. Do you remember how you got here?"

Harry nodded his head and looked down pensively. One of the last things that he remembered at the wedding was staring at Ginny's vacant eyes.

Poppy gave him a sad smile and said, "I'm so sorry that you lost your friend, Harry and I'm eternally grateful that you were able to help so many others. Everyone who survived owes their life to you. I know those words won't bring Ginny back, but everyone knows that you did everything that you possibly could have. She was a lovely young woman."

With tears welling in his eyes, Harry nodded. He couldn't find the words to say anything.

Poppy said, "You're welcome to stay as long as you like. Some of the others are down having an early lunch now. You're probably hungry. Would you like to go down, or would you prefer to eat here?"

"I'll go down, I guess."

"OK. I'll join you. Get dressed and let me know when you're ready. Miss Granger and her parents left the hospital wing a few hours ago. They're probably somewhere out on the grounds."

Harry looked around for a moment and asked, "Where are my..."

Poppy smiled and replied, "Your Dobby stopped by and took your armor, a pistol and your sword back to your home. He left you these to wear." She looked at Harry, smiled again, and said, "He certainly is a devoted little creature."

Harry cracked a faint smile and nodded. He was hungry, but didn't really want to talk at the moment. After he showered, he put on the black jeans, dragonhide boots and a grey shirt. Harry noticed that the little elf had made him two new sox to wear.

They walked down the hallways toward the great hall in companionable silence. Neither felt the need to chitchat just for the noise. They reached the Great Hall and found Susan Bones sitting alone at one of the tables. She was the only person there. They sat down beside her and more food immediately appeared by them.

Harry took a sandwich and a handful of crisps and began eating. She smiled and said, "Hi, Harry."

Harry, assuming that she'd been badly hurt during the wedding replied, "Hi Susan. Were you hurt?"

Susan replied, "Not badly. I broke my leg but Madame Pomfrey made it right as soon as I got here. After Hannah, I really don't have anywhere..." Her voice trailed off. She didn't want to add to Harry's burdens. Changing the subject she said, "I saw a phoenix this morning."

Harry, a master at redirecting a conversation himself, saw her maneuver and asked, "Do you need a place to live? I have plenty of extra rooms if you like. Hermione and her parents are there as well. I really wouldn't mind."

Susan studied his face for a moment, and concluded that his offer was genuine and without any strings. She replied, "Thanks Harry. I'd like that. I don't have anything else to bring. The Death Eaters torched Hannah's home last night. Everything that I had..."

Harry could feel her loss and replied, "I'm sorry about Hannah. I should have... I should have done... more."

There were tears in Susan's eyes, but her voice was steady. "There was nothing else to do Harry. You did more than anyone could have asked. I'm sorry about Ginny. I know that..."

Both of their throats had lumps in them from the pain. She gave Harry a consoling hug, and for a few moments the pain seemed less.

After a moment, Harry told her, "There's plenty of everything that you might need at the house. Don't worry." He took out a slip of paper from his wallet and showed it to her, saying, "This is my address. I'll be ready to go in about an hour."

Poppy was watching Harry's generosity at work as the Grangers came back from their walk and found them finishing their lunch. Susan saw them and got up to hug Hermione as the others came over. She had a smile on her face as she said, "I've a place to stay at now. Harry told me that he has some extra rooms at his house."

Dan winked at Harry and quipped, "As refugee shelters go, it's the best I've ever seen."

Harry asked, "When's the..." He felt like he was chocking on the words.

Susan took mercy and replied, "The services are tomorrow. It was in the morning paper. The actual burials were yesterday."

Harry nodded and asked, "What about Ron?"

Hermione replied, "It didn't say in the paper that he's been charged with anything. His spell..."

"Hit Director Hammer. I saw it too."

Dan said, "It was chaos. In the nonmagical world, it would be called friendly fire. Unfortunately it happens all too frequently."

"What will happen to him?"

This time it was Poppy who replied, "Unfortunately the wizarding world sometimes holds itself to unrealistically high standards. At a minimum, his wand will be snapped and he'll have to leave the country."

Susan nodded, and replied, "Auntie had to prosecute several cases like that. They all ended up in Azkaban."

"I'm not letting Ron go to Azkaban," replied Harry with steel in his eyes.

They finished their lunch, and took the portkey that Tonks had left them back to Grimmauld Place.

... --- ...

Molly and Arthur had the task that no parent would want – selecting burial clothing for two of their children. Molly decided on the bridesmaid dress that Ginny had worn... had worn that... that night. For Percy, they had selected a set of his grey dress robes.

The services of the British witches and wizards was held Tuesday July 22. Services were held at Silbury hill within the Avebury stone circle. Unlike the more well known stone circle at Stonehenge which had been overrun with muggle tourists, the Avebury stone circle north of Salisbury had been used for group wizarding gathering for forty-five centuries. The collection of nearly a hundred of the giant rocks had been placed there to provide a quiet place of reflection and beauty.

The bodies had been buried or cremated according to the individual families' wishes Sunday evening as wizarding tradition dictated that the body be taken care of within twenty-four hours.

Most of the witches and wizards in Britain other than those who were responsible for the deaths had come, though not necessarily to pay their respects to Scrimgeour, or Hammer. The Quidditch teams of Britain all came to pay their respects to Oliver Wood. Wilkie Tycross at one time or another had been the apparation instructor to hundreds of witches and wizards. Croaker and Augusta Longbottom and

Perkins had been very popular among the more experienced purebloods. Hannah, Katie, Angelina and of course Ginny had each made many friends at school. All would be missed.

Natasha Abraxan looked out at the massive wizarding crowd and began speaking.

“Good evening. The law abiding wizarding world was badly insulted last Saturday. The wizard who calls himself Voldemort ordered the murder of three hundred and twenty good witches and wizards in an effort to crush the spirit of Britain’s wizarding population.” The crowd had become silent at her engaging words.

She continued. “We are gathered today to honor those who fell trying to protect themselves, their friends and their loved ones. They tried to resist rather than simply flee. They tried to carry on rather than bow under, and I am proud to know them. I hope that each of you are proud to know them. They were our parents, our children, our sisters, brothers, friends, co-workers, neighbors or lovers.” At this point, most everyone had tears in their eyes. Unlike Fudge, or Scrimgeour, High Priestess Abraxan could captivate an audience.

A few minutes later she concluded, saying, “Let them serve as a reminder that fighting back is the right thing to do. We will continue to fight back, and ultimately, we will prevail.”

“Please stand as I read the names.”

Hannah Abbott - Student

Katie Bell – St. Mungo’s Training Program

Michelle Edgecombe – Floo Network Administrator

Connie Hammer – Director Magical Law Enforcement

Angelina Johnson - Merchant

Augusta Longbottom – Department of Mysteries

Algie Longbottom – Department of Mysteries

Michael Perkins – Misuse of Muggle Artifacts

Cameron Scott – Dragon Master

Louise Scrimgeour - Healer

Rufus Scrimgeour – Minister of Magic

Andromeda Tonks - Merchant

Ted Tonks - Accountant

Wilkie Twycross - Apparation Instructor

Ginny Weasley - Student

Percy Weasley – Ministry of Magic

Michael Wood – Senior Auror

Oliver Wood – Quidditch player

Harry was silent through the entire service. He barely heard a word that High Priestess Abraxan said, other than the names. His thoughts drifted momentarily to the statistics. Of the one hundred and one people that were murdered, eighteen were British. Ginny had mentioned that about a hundred of the guests were friends or relatives of Fleur. Bill had said that their service had been the previous day.

“... Others who did their best to defend themselves and will also be remembered.” Minister Abraxan’s concluding remarks were lost on Harry as he briefly glanced at Arthur, whose thoughts were currently focused on his youngest son.

... --- ...

Remus felt terrible for Tonks losing her mother and father, but was profoundly grateful that the spirited young witch that he counted as a

lover was among the survivors. His thoughts drifted back to the service that had been held for Lilly and James. As was the case then, there were no words that the High Priestess turned Minister of Magic could eloquently say that would adequately comfort those who were here.

The unspoken thoughts on most people's minds were drifting around the edges of the miracle that Harry, The Chosen One, had somehow been able to perform, which had kept the two hundred and nineteen survivors from joining their friends in a horrible death.

Dan and Emma Granger stood on either side of their daughter. They knew that Hermione had lost her best girlfriend, and nothing could bring her back. They had also lost their home, yet at the same time, were grateful that they were alive and healthy. At that moment, Dan counted himself a lucky man, and gave Hermione a squeeze on her shoulder.

... --- ...

After the service, Harry went up to Molly and they gave each other a bone-crushing hug. Out of habit, Molly reached up to flatten down Harry's hair. "She loved you so much, Harry. You made her so happy these last months."

"Thanks Mrs. Weasley. I'm sorry I wasn't able to attend..." Harry decided not to relate the vision that he'd had two nights earlier. He felt a piece of his broken heart tearing away.

Still hugging him, Molly replied, "Don't give it a thought, dear." For another minute they held each other in silence, each lost in their own thoughts.

Finally Harry looked down at the woman who had been so very kind to him and asked, "What can I do to help Ron?"

Not wanting to add to Harry's burdens Molly replied, "I don't know if anyone can help him."

Harry looked her in the eye and said, "I'll think of something." He was the head of the Order of the Phoenix. Harry realized that it was time for him to act like it. He went to look for Minister Abraxan.

... --- ...

There were a lot of people searching and being sought out after the service. Minerva wanted to talk with Harry, who wanted to talk with Abraxan, who wanted to talk with Straighthand, who wanted to talk with Moody, who didn't give a rat's arse what the former supply clerk had to say.

Professor Cynthia Vector and Susan caught up with Harry. Harry, realizing that the two witches hadn't come to talk with him regarding Ginny, was surprised when they both gave him a hug. Vector, a thin woman with shag cut black hair said, "Harry, I know we haven't had much of a chance to speak together before, but like the others I want to do what I can to help."

Harry nodded and replied, "We'll be meeting tomorrow evening at seven at the castle. Please plan on attending."

Vector nodded and said, "Thank you for your faith. I'll do my best."

Susan said, "I'll tell the others." They walked off.

A moment later Harry was approached by the Knight Bus driver, Ernie Prang. The short man with impossibly thick glasses said, "G'day, Mr. Potter. I appreciate everything that you were able to do for Stan. He's a good lad."

Embarrassed, Harry said, "No worries, Ernie. It was the right thing to do. I didn't do very much."

"You did enough, Mr. Potter. Stan starts a new position on Monday with them Weasley brothers, Fred and George."

Harry was happy to hear that and said, "Say hi if you see him Ernie. I think Susan Bones is looking for you. I'll see you again soon. Cheers."

Harry saw Minister Abraxan and made eye contact. He was surprised when she came over and greeted him. "Hello, Mr. Potter. I wish the circumstances were better, but I'm always glad to see you."

Harry replied, "Thank you. I feel the same. Congratulations on your new position. I wish you nothing but success."

Sensing his sincerity, she replied, "Thank you. Perhaps the ministry will become your calling at some time."

"Harry didn't know what to say, and smiled. He said, "Minister, "I wanted to ask you about Ron Weasley."

The smile left Abraxan's face for a moment, and then she realized that Potter was making a genuine inquiry, not trying to force a back door deal. She asked, "What is your interest in the case, Mr. Potter? Ron Weasley hasn't been charged with anything yet."

Harry looked puzzled and the Minister continued, "That's not to say that he won't in the near future. The Aurors are still interviewing witnesses."

Harry nodded and asked, "What's likely to happen?"

"Depending on the findings, He'll be charged appropriately ranging from reckless use of deadly force to capital murder. There are mandatory sentences in the case of death of an Auror. In the less severe situation, if found guilty his wand would be snapped, memory modified and he'd be sent out of the country to live as a muggle. Based on what I've seen so far, most likely he will receive a twenty to thirty year sentence in Azkaban. If there had been any evidence of malicious intent, he would have been sent through the veil last Sunday morning."

Harry didn't know what to say. He asked, "When will the trial be held?"

Abraxan was aware that they were starting to gather a crowd, and concluded saying, "He's being held at the Queen's pleasure. I would

expect that the trial will be scheduled to begin by the end of July. Director Straighthand will be responsible for bringing the case to trial. It was nice to see you again, Mr. Potter. Perhaps we can have lunch together sometime.” She handed him her business card. It had a cellular telephone number.

Harry looked at it and nodded. He still had the cellular telephone that the Grangers had given him. He wrote his number on a piece of parchment and gave it to her. She smiled at him and said, “I expect that a lot of young witches would love to have this information, Mr. Potter. I shall take good care of it.”

Harry realized that there were the spoken and unspoken words, smiled and replied, “Thank you Minister. Me too.” She had just invited him to a private lunch to further discuss the case.

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While Harry and Minister Abraxan were conversing, Arthur was standing nearby watching, marveling that Harry had such easy access to power and silently hoping that somehow Harry might be able save his son from a horrible death or life imprisonment.

Arthur went back to his best friend and helped her home. When they got back to the Burrow, Molly asked where Harry was.

Arthur replied, “He’s doing everything that he possibly can, Molly.”

She looked at her rock and asked, “Are you sure? Maybe we can draft a petition...”

Arthur shook his head, and calmly replied, “Molly, he was talking with the new Minister when we left. He’s trying to help us.”

Molly was sobbing as the balding redhead patted her on the back. Finally she said, “He’s probably hungry. I’ll bake Harry a pie.”

Arthur nodded, relieved that she had momentarily distracted herself.

... --- ...

At Voldemort's headquarters, there was no offer to bake a pie. Several of the leaders of the dementors had been killed, and the others were less interested in following the dark wizard. They had feasted well at the wedding, but lost twenty-two of their number, the first killed within the time of their memories. It was within their legends that they could be killed with a fabled sword. For hundreds of years they believed it to be lost, and as a band survived, slowly increasing their number. Two days ago, their very existence had been threatened, and they knew that they had attacked the one who could end their existence. While they could not see Harry, several of the survivors had sensed him, though the two who had been closest to him had not survived.

Riddle could not afford to lose such deadly allies. He appeased them by arranging to launch a joint attack on Hogsmede the next evening, assuring them that there would be no one in their way this time.

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After the service, Harry, the Grangers and Susan went back to his home. He had invited Remus and Tonks to come. After helping Susan pick out a room and making certain that she had things to wear they sat down to a light dinner then went to one of the sitting rooms.

Remus could see the guilt inked all over Harry and asked the question that many had asked themselves. He opened several butterbeers and a bottle of Napoleon brandy for the older people. After everyone had had some he asked, "Harry, if you had to do it over again, what would you have done differently?"

Harry wasn't certain that he knew the answer. The first few seconds were chaos, but they might have needed a dozen guards rather than the four assigned to provide a sufficient warning. He replied, "Based on how I was positioned, I reached for everyone that I could before the first killing curse hit." Harry glanced at Susan, guilty that he hadn't been able to help Hannah too.

Remus said, "So in the first two seconds you saved Ginny, Hammer, Doctor and Doctor Granger and Hermione. Six people in two seconds is quite admirable. Then what?"

Harry replied, "I started hitting the Death Eaters. I think I got three before Dan hit Bellatrix. It was chaos until the dementors came."

Remus pushed at the subject and asked, "OK, then what?"

Setting his empty bottle down, Harry replied, "I felt them and called for people to cast a Patronus charm."

Thoughtful of Harry's answer, Remus replied, "But aside from the one that you had cast, hardly anyone else could. There must have been thirty people there who knew the charm, but aside from you, only a few were strong enough to get anything more than a wisp of vapor. They just swooped in on us all at once. Then what?"

Thinking for only a moment, Harry responded, saying, "I had helped someone a few tables away. Someone knocked my wand out of my hand, and I hadn't thought to bring my spare. Several of the dementors grabbed me and somehow I stabbed one before it could get me. I was pretty shaken up."

Realizing what her lover was trying to accomplish, Tonks said, "Harry, stop there for a second. Your Patronus was able to move some of the dementors to the other side of the garden. Good for us, bad for the Delacours. There were so many dementors there at that point most people had passed out. The dementors were in the process of kissing everyone there, and would have succeeded within another two or three minutes. Somehow you were able to kill some of them which made them move away a bit. Then Cadet Alyx and some others were able to cast a Patronus. It turned the tide."

Remus asked, "What happened next?"

Harry said, "I heard the pistol shots and ran to help Dr. Granger. I stabbed a few more dementors, saw the other Patronus, and then they left."

Tonks said, "Susan, what do you remember?"

The somewhat soused Hufflepuff replied, "We were talking at the table. The curses started firing. Professor Lupin knocked me out of my chair. Somehow I broke my leg and all I could see was Hanna slumped over her chair. I saw Director Hammer get hit with a spell and there was blood everywhere. I thought I'd been hit too until I realized that it wasn't mine. I passed out when the dementors came. The next thing I knew, I was in the hospital wing."

Remus passed out more beverages and commented, "I was only able to hit one Death Eater before the dementors came. I'm sorry that I wasn't able to do more, but I did the best that I could."

Hermione said, "I only stunned one and I couldn't cast my Patronus to save Mum or Ginny."

Before Harry could say anything, Tonks said, "I wasn't able to save Connie ... or my parents." At this, she slumped down in her chair and dropped her head into her hands.

Not willing to let her fall on her own sword, Remus hugged her and said, "You saved me and did what you could for Director Hammer. You're my hero." Setting his empty glass down he said, "Harry, you did everything that you could have and then some. Mourn Ginny's loss. We all will, but don't let yourself feel guilty because you couldn't save everyone. We could have just as easily all been killed. No one brought a second wand Harry. It was supposed to be a wedding, not a war zone."

Remus stopped and took several deep breaths. After a minute he repeated his original question. "So aside from the original security detail what would you have done differently?"

"Paired up, I suppose."

Tonks said, "That's a great idea Harry, but it wasn't a set piece battle. It was an overgrown ambush. I was there in my party dress, not battle robes. Cor, how did you think to be wearing your armor? I didn't even have my knickers."

Somewhat embarrassed by her last comment, Harry replied, "Dunno."

Dan excused himself and came back with the scorched vest that Harry had loaned him. He said, "Harry, look at this." Harry took the vest that Dan handed him and felt the groove etched deeply into the thick dragon hide. "Harry, you might call it luck, but I'd call it exceptional contingency planning. I'd be in the ground right now if you hadn't loaned me that armor vest. I was able to stop some lunatic from hurting anyone else using the pistol that you loaned me. I'm not proud of having taken a life, but I'd do it again in a blink to stop those people from hurting anyone of us."

Tonks gasped, "Cor Blimey, Dr. Granger. That was you? You stopped Bellatrix Lestrange!"

Harry reflected for a moment. Sirius and Ginny had both been avenged, but it didn't bring them back. He excused himself and went up to bed. The framed photo that Colin had taken of Ginny and him during the last month of school was on his dresser. He was hugging Ginny as she leaned up and kissed his cheek. Harry felt a huge lump in his throat as he shut off the lights.

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A/Ns

Please take the time to review. Your feedback makes for a better story.

Chapter 11

... --- ...

As Harry was trying to get to sleep Monday evening, Draco and his Father were visiting Mrs. Bulstrode. Voldemort, who was in a serious cash flow pinch, had ordered the Malfoys to collect the monthly tribute a week early.

It was a risky move. Lucius Malfoy's wanted poster was plastered all over the wizarding world, and the old lobbyist was too arrogant to properly conceal his identity. The Polyjuice prostitution operation was located in central London and was frequented by both muggles and wizards alike.

As Lucius worked off a year of Azkaban induced frustration with one of the house employees, Draco was counting the buckets of coins, splitting half with Madam Phyllis Bulstrode and taking the other half that came to 8400 Galleons. A few minutes later Lucius came walking towards the front office adjusting the buttons on his trousers. Draco had divided the gold into sacks of 400 galleons each as he had been instructed.

In an incredibly stupid move, the younger Malfoy had decided to pocket two of the sacks for himself. Unknown to him, each month Madam Bulstrode had been instructed to place an advertisement in the daily Prophet. After they left she sent the owl to the Daily Prophet with the advertisement.

Bulstrode's Social Club – Kings Cross

84 lovely discrete young things waiting to serve your every need.

Open 24 hours BJ,SM,2on1,PJ,Visa,MC OK

... --- ...

While Lucius was reacquainting himself with some of the more natural human interactions, Riddle had summoned Pettigrew for two points of business. He examined Wormtail's pensive memory of the

wedding attack twice before he saw what he was looking for. Watching from the far side of the Weasley's garden, he was watching in the direction that the shots would be fired from.

Miraculously he did not curse Wormtail into unconsciousness, as it was the second item of business that interested him. "Wormtail have you found where the Death Eaters were taken?"

Wormtail replied, "There was a transport to Azkaban Sunday evening. Perhaps they were taken there."

"What about the Death Eaters who were killed during the attack?"

"I haven't found them yet, Master. I will continue searching for them." As he left the Dark Lord's presence, Pettigrew realized that the possibility of reporting back with the news that all or most of the missing Death Eaters might be dead could be a most painful message to deliver. They clearly needed a win.

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Riddle's plan was fairly simple - Attack the village of Hogsmede using more or less the same strategy as the wedding. This time Riddle would send in the dementors first and save the experienced Death Eaters to finish off the wounded. They then would sack and pillage the town as a means of increasing his gold supply.

The dementors would attack shortly after dusk on Tuesday night and the Death Eaters would move out of the forest ten minutes later. If some of the men wanted to have their way with some of the villagers, he would have no objection. It cost him nothing and raised morale considerably.

With 175 dementors he could have them attack from all four sides and begin feeding immediately. In the event that one or two of the villagers could cast the Patronus charm, the dementors would still cause considerable mayhem with loss of life. At that point the disorganized stragglers would be easy pickings for the Death Eaters.

As a diversion he would personally launch an attack against Diagon Alley. He had been enraged when the Daily Prophet editorial suggested that individual witches and wizards had a responsibility to participate in their own protection. He had a much easier time when the victims sat frozen in fear waiting in vain for help to arrive to save them.

... --- ...

On Tuesday Minerva reviewed the enrollment for the fall term. There had been 460 students enrolled for the previous spring term. 60 students graduated in June even though there hadn't been a ceremony. She had originally received notification that 96 students had been withdrawn by their parents which would badly impact their budget. Another half dozen had become Death Eaters, and 4 students had been killed over the summer break.

Flitwick walked into her office and knocked on the door before entering. "Good morning, Minerva. How does the fall term enrollment look this week?"

"Not good. I have only received 12 acceptances of the 62 offer letters that were sent. If things stand as they are, we will have 306 students enrolled in the fall."

"It's not a reflection on you Minerva. Some..."

McGonagall snapped back harder than she'd intended to. "Of course it is. Enrollment held last year because parents were convinced that Albus would keep everyone safe. Hogwarts was supposed to be the safest place in Britain. Word got out that Potter wasn't planning on returning in the fall and the withdrawal owls came in flocks. At 800 Galleons per student the budget will have to be revised again." Her frustration was getting out of hand.

"Perhaps he'd be willing to make some sort of announcement or have something put into the Prophet or the Quibbler. It would probably be worth 75 students. It might be awkward for you to bring it up. I'll mention it tonight. Speaking of the Quibbler, Luna mentioned that Old Crow set up a Yahoo group. Can you believe it?"

“Coming from her, who knows? Do you think Harry would be willing to help us? He hates publicity.”

The diminutive wizard thought for a moment and replied, “True, but sometimes it comes with the mantle of leadership. Have you identified a candidate for the Defense position?”

“No. There hasn’t been one applicant.”

“Do you have any ideas?”

“Yes, but the best person for the job already has the weight of the world on his shoulders.”

“Good point. What about someone from the Order?”

“I could ask this evening to see if anyone is interested.”

“That’s a good idea. I’ll take Potter over to the Three Broomsticks for a pint after the meeting.”

... --- ...

Nick Straighthand was finding running a law enforcement department in times of war to be a very difficult task. He had storerooms full of triplicate form parchment, which would have pleased former Minister Fudge, but only two of the Aurors on the street had body armor, and in both cases it was personal property.

The Cadet training classes were in disarray with the deaths of instructors Dawlish, Wood and Croaker from the Department of Mysteries. Croaker would be next to impossible to replace. Straighthand realized that the department had to have some tactical capability, and realized that he lacked the leadership skills to implement the critically needed changes.

The assessments of the on duty Aurors’ actions from the wedding indicated that the Aurors performed no better than the wedding guests and in many cases less so. Of the 34 Death Eaters killed or

captured 10 had been brought down by a handful of students, 16 by the adults 4 by the off duty Aurors and only 4 by the on duty Aurors. The most notorious of the Death Eaters, Bellatrix Lestrange had been put down by a muggle

He was coming to realize that he was over his head as the Director of MLE, but his pride would not let him admit it. On the other hand, he had enjoyed his previous job, which mostly entailed filling out forms and making sure other people filled out forms properly. He was good at that. More to the point, he wasn't as likely to get himself killed. It had just recently occurred to him that Death Eaters had murdered his two predecessors. He wasn't a coward, but he realized that he wasn't an inspirational leader or tactician either.

Perhaps he could manage to get out of this job and get his old job back without losing too much face. He pulled out a parchment and quill and began to write.

Dear Minister Abraxan,

It is with the deepest respect that I make the following request. While I appreciate your confidence in me and am very grateful for my recent appointment as Director of Magical Law Enforcement, I believe that my talents are ideally suited to the position that I formerly occupied, Chief Auror Quartermaster. During my tenure at my current position it has become apparent to me that there are other wizards qualified to make Auror assignments, but relatively few with the perspective and tenacity to competently direct the flow of paperwork that is essential for the smooth functioning of any successful organization. For the good of the entire wizarding community I ask that you return me to that indispensable post.

Faithfully yours in service to wizardkind,

Nicholas Straighthand

... --- ...

While McGonagall was fretting over enrollments and Straighthand was considering his career choices, at Emma's suggestion Dan had

taken Harry out to play a round of golf. It was a healing experience for both of them. Dan was a member at Cottesmore Golf and Country Club and had an easy time making a tee time for the two of them at 9 AM. Dan drove Harry in his BMW and finally felt like he had the tiniest bit of control back into his life when they got in the car and took the M4 motorway back into Crawley.

When Emma had suggested it to Hermione the night before, Hermione had been hesitant, citing all of the things that needed to get done for the Order meeting the next evening. Emma convinced her daughter and ultimately Harry by telling her, "They've been through a horrible ordeal. We all have, but I think Harry needs another man to talk with. I know Dan enjoys his company. Let your dad do this Hermione. He wants to help and giving Harry someone to talk with might be the best for everyone."

Dan rented Harry a set of sticks and showed him the basics. They spent a half hour on the practice putting green, then moved on to the basics of chipping. At the driving range he showed Harry the short irons then moved up to the long irons. Cottesmore was not a long course, so they played a three iron off the tee box and usually ended up in the fairways halfway to the hole.

On the third fairway, Dan said to Harry, "I wanted to thank you for taking care of us last weekend. It got pretty hairy there for a few minutes, but you really kept your head. You're a good man, Harry."

"You too sir. You held things together." Harry was a bit embarrassed by the man's words, yet at the same time delighted to hear the compliment.

Dan patted Harry on the shoulder and replied, "Harry, we've gone to war together and killed on each other's behalf. I think we can be on a first name basis. Please call me Dan. You're up."

Harry hit a five iron, swung too hard skulling the ball as it cut through the grass, hit the pin and the ball bounced back just inches from the hole.

Dan shook his head in wonder and said, "Great shot Harry. That was an ugly shot, but you have a great position. Sometimes it doesn't matter how you got it there as long as it's in."

Dan chipped to the green with the ball flying in a graceful arc and landing about eight feet away. Harry noticed the differences between the sets and commented, "Your club shafts are made of metal, mine are made out of some sort of black material."

Dan replied, "Your set is newer and the shafts are made of a graphite composite. Mine are made of stainless steel. Golf has been around for hundreds and hundreds of years. The first clubs used wooden shafts. Actually the very first golf course isn't too far from your school, some 75 miles to the southeast. The very first golf balls were made of leather and filled with goose feathers.

After nine they stopped for the day, had lunch and a few pints. Harry felt completely responsible for the disruption to Hermione's parents' lives. He said, "I'm sorry that things have turned out like they have for you this summer. It's my..."

Dan had been warned that Harry might feel this way, put down his pint glass and said, "Stop Harry. Through luck, quick thinking on Hermione's part, generosity and good planning on your part, I've survived two attacks on my family's lives in the last month and we're here to talk about it over a corned beef sandwich, crisps and a few pints. What exactly are you sorry about? That some nutter decided to go after my family? That we were offered a safe place to go and stay?"

"No."

"Harry, if I miss my next put because a duck quacks while I'm lining up my shot and get distracted, is it your fault that you didn't hunt down the duck before we played?"

"No. I couldn't help that."

“Harry, you and Hermione helped put some men in prison last year. As I understand it, some of them escaped over the weekend. Is that your fault?”

“Dunno. Maybe.”

A bit sharper than he intended, Dan snapped back, “That’s bull, Harry. You had nothing to do with it. If they go out and attack someone tonight, it is your fault?”

“If I’d...”

Dan was getting frustrated at the teen. “If you what? Were you going to act as their judge and jury and execute them last year?” Seeing Harry shake his head, Dan continued, “You have to distinguish between guilt, responsibility and opportunity. You’re not responsible to protect everyone in Britain. If someone is killed tonight you shouldn’t feel guilty about it. You won’t have had the opportunity to protect them.”

“But...”

“Harry, you didn’t end your friend’s life. Do you blame Hermione for not saving her?”

“No. Of course not.”

Dan looked Harry in the eye and replied, “She does. She somehow thinks that she could have done something.”

“That’s crap. It just happened.”

Dan nodded, finished his glass and replied, “Right. It just happened. She couldn’t save her and you couldn’t either. It just happened. You need to hear your own words, son. Ginny wouldn’t want you to feel guilty. You lost your friend Harry. You should feel sad, but you shouldn’t feel guilty. Can you distinguish the two?”

“I think so. Thanks.”

“OK. Next time we’ll talk about investing and using a sand wedge. Moody told me that you always like to pick up the lunch bills, so I’ll let you.”

Harry smiled broadly and replied, “No worries, Dan. Thanks for a great day.” He felt much better.

... --- ...

They drove back to Grimmauld Place to find Hermione working furiously at the study table in the library. After the house had been wired for electricity, Dan had gone out and purchased some electrical appliances including a television, a new DVD player, coffee maker and the latest PC; a 90Mhz Pentium II with a 512 MB drive, Windows 95 and the brand new Office 97. To complete it, he purchased a laser printer.

Hermione was busy preparing agendas, spreadsheets and lists of assignments for the meeting and had just hit the print button when Harry walked in the room. Looking up, she said, “Oh, hi Harry. I wasn’t expecting you back for another hour or so. Did you finish early?”

“Hi. Dan gave me a few lessons then we played nine holes and had lunch. He may have mentioned that I’d done quite enough damage to the course for one day.”

‘Dan? It must have gone better than I’d guessed.’ Hermione gave Harry a curious smile and asked, “Did you have fun?”

“Really quite a bit. We walked and talked a lot as we played. Maybe he’ll take me again.”

Hermione was surprised by Harry’s obvious sincerity. She hated the game. “I don’t think you need to worry about that. He plays several rounds a week. You really enjoyed it?”

“Loads. Have you played?”

“He took mum and me a few times the last few years. Mum’s OK with it. I think its dreadful boring, but I’m really glad that you had a good time. You needed to get out.”

“It was good. We played the Griffin course. Maybe we can play the Phoenix course next time.”

Hermione frowned and asked, “Are you sure that it was a muggle club? I never thought about the names before this moment.”

“Dunno. I didn’t see anyone I knew. I could ask Bill Weasley to check on it. What are you working on?”

Hoping that he’d ask, she replied, “I listed some ideas for agenda for the meeting tonight to help you along with a listing of the committees. Have you thought about which group you might want to have the new members fit into?”

“I thought I’d explain them and let them decide which one they might like to fit into. The groups really don’t have to be the same size, do they?”

“Well no, but...” It was apparent that she thought they should be as nearly the same size as possible.

“I can’t really see forcing Ernie Prang into the research group just to make the numbers even.”

Realizing that Harry had a point in regards to the nearly blind bus driver she replied, “You’re right. I also think we need to talk about the wedding, be certain that as many people as possible can cast a Patronus and think about how to strengthen our position with the new Minister of Magic.”

“The Order is a secret Militia. I don’t think it can have an official position within the Ministry. They can know about us and tolerate us, but they can’t recognize us. I’m having lunch with Minister Abraxan tomorrow. I’m trying to see what we can do to help Ron.”

“Thanks Harry...” She wasn’t certain about her personal friendship for the lanky redhead, but didn’t want to see him suffer.

... --- ...

After all the new members had been voted in, Harry began the meeting on time. “Good evening. Welcome new members. Welcome back everyone else. There are several things that we should discuss and work on this evening. First, a number of the members were involved with the combined Death Eater and dementor attack that took place at the Weasley wedding ceremony last Saturday.”

As about half of the Order had been guests at the wedding; it made sense to bring it up so everyone knew the same facts. “The best numbers that we have indicate that there were 45 Death Eaters involved in the attack. I think it’s OK to assume that Voldemort sent everyone that he had at us. 34 of those Death Eaters were either killed or captured.”

Tonks cut in, “Excuse me Harry, all 34 of the Death Eaters are dead. 15 were sent to the Ministry holding cells. 3 of those died of wounds before they were processed. The other 12 were given trials, convicted and sent through the veil on Sunday.”

Harry asked, “Were their deaths reported anywhere?”

Tonks thought for a moment and said, “No.”

“We should treat that as confidential information. Thank you Tonks.” Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. It was hard enough fighting a Death Eater, but few wanted to fight the same one over and over, and it was apparent that the prison system wasn’t really secure.

Harry continued, marveling at the statistics that Hermione had put together for him. “Unfortunately of the 320 wedding guests and a handful of Ministry Aurors who were on duty, the light side suffered 101 deaths and about 75 injuries primarily due to the follow-on attack from several hundred dementors. A substantial number of those killed or injured were guests of the Delacours. Order member Ginny Weasley was murdered by one of the dementors as were most of

those killed. Order member Ron Weasley was arrested for the death of MLE Director Connie Hammer.”

Harry purposely avoided looking at either Molly or Arthur as he continued reading the names that Hermione had provided for him. He was aware how brutally painful the conversation must be for them. It was ripping at his heart too.

Hestia asked, “What’s likely to happen to Ron?”

Moody replied, “I’ve seen a dozen of these cases in my years and was the investigator in half of them. The answer is, it varies. There is a minimum sentencing requirement in the wrongful death of an Auror that was put in place after the first war as a means of forcing a sentence on those scum who killed an Auror then claimed that they were under the Imperius curse. In this case, there is no doubt in my mind that Weasley just fired without aiming and hit the wrong person. Most likely he’ll be sentenced to 20 years in Azkaban. If he has the Minister’s ear, he could get his wand snapped, memory modified and sent out of the country to live as a muggle. In my experience, if he is found responsible, the Wizengamot will follow the sentence recommended by the Minister.” At least three people in the Order had seen Ron fire the explosive blast into Hammer.

“Arthur stood and asked, Harry, you’ve spoken with the new Minister. What do you think?” He was nearly desperate for a solution that might save his son.

Harry replied, “I think she’s a reasonable person. I’m supposed to have lunch with her tomorrow in her office. My concern is Ron’s ability to survive if the dementors are returned to guard duty at Azkaban.”

Moody nodded and said, “Good point. Most people didn’t last their second year. If it gets filled up with Death Eaters again, he won’t stand a chance, dementors or not.”

Molly was visibly weeping, but didn’t say anything. Arthur asked, “Harry, you’re his best friend. What do you suggest?”

Harry thought for a moment. He'd planned an answer assuming that this question might come up. He replied, "Arthur, it's not my decision to make. I was told that Sirius lasted longer than most in Azkaban. He told me that he was able to maintain his sanity because he knew that he'd been falsely imprisoned and because he could turn himself into a dog for long periods at a time. Ron wouldn't have either of those advantages. If he had the chance, I'd hope that he could be free to live a normal life even if it meant leaving the country and all memories of the wizarding world behind."

Kingsley added, "Molly wouldn't you feel better knowing that your son was living a normal life even without magic than hoping that he'd somehow be able to last another night in prison, even if that meant that you couldn't see him? He could be in high school in Sydney or Brisbane to start the fall term."

Moody replied, "It's moot. He won't be given a choice unless Potter can get him off the hook. What else is on the agenda?" The old Auror was never known for finesse.

Harry replied, "Just a few things. For the new members, we have three sub-groups if you want the opportunity to get more involved. There's the research group that Hermione leads. They also help by being able to provide first aid in the event of an attack as well as being able to defend themselves. Several of the injured guests owe their lives to Luna and Arabella for the treatment that they received before being sent to St. Mungo's. There's a search team that also doubles as a backup fighting team. Remus leads that group. Finally there is the fighting group led by Alastor."

Harry let everyone have a moment to find the groups that they wanted to be in. Then he concluded, saying, "Last but not least, let's practice the Patronus charm once. The incantation is Expecto Patronum. It requires that you think your happiest thought as you are casting it." Harry recalled kissing Ginny on the train. His Patronus flew out bright silver but quickly faded.

About half of the group was able to cast a fully formed Patronus. Among them was Cadet Alyx whose horse form shined brightly. It

was a nice way to end the meeting. Moody said, "The fighting team will be meeting immediately afterwards at the Three Broomsticks."

Aberforth gave Moody a strange look.

Moody replied, "I prefer to drink out of a glass that's been washed this decade."

Aberforth replied, "What's the difference? You drink out of your flask anyway and stick someone else with the tab for your dinners. I've got a good room in the back. It's nice and private."

Moody shrugged and began walking out the door. Harry picked up the Gryffindor sword that he'd brought and put it back in the hard sided shotgun case that he'd picked up in London.

Hermione said, "The research group will meet in the library." In addition to the Horcruxes, she also wanted to research if another sword might work on dementors.

Remus said, "The search group will meet in this room. Seeing the disappointed looks, Remus added, "There's been a change of venue. We'll meet at the Hog's Head pub in ten minutes."

There were many nods of approval. They followed Moody's group out the door.

Harry was pleased to see that Cadet Alyx had joined the fighting group along with Lee Jordan and Parvati. Looking behind him he could see that, Ernie Prang, Ernie Macmillan, Lavender, Justin, Roger, Hooch and Vector had joined Remus' group.

... --- ...

Remus had an uneasy feeling as he walked with the others to the Hog's Head. He couldn't place it, but his werewolf senses had him on high alert. The feeling didn't go away at they reached the door of the pub. The bartender gave them the key to the back room which contained 15 chairs and was about as clean as the bar rags. Remus bought a round for the group and they settled in. He enjoyed the

leadership role and enjoyed having enough gold to be able to treat for beers.

After everyone sat down on the dingy chairs Remus said, "There is little to do tonight regarding the Horcruxes. Hermione's group hasn't come up with any new leads on the other Horcruxes."

He continued. "I would like to mention that Harry was able to destroy some of the dementors using his Gryffindor sword. Should we find ourselves in that position again and Harry happens to have his remarkable sword with him, we might want to try and drive the dementors towards him using the Patronus charm."

Ernie and Lavender weren't sure of that idea and Ernie asked, "Professor, er Remus, I heard that Harry drove all of the dementors away last week. I doubt that they'd come back so soon."

Arthur shook his head and sadly said, "Ernie, Lavender, I only hope that you never have to witness anything so terrible in your life. They only need a few seconds to suck... to do their deed. Please don't underestimate them. They're..." He never got to finish his thought.

Screams could be heard from outside the window.

... --- ...

While the dementors were gathering around the village of Hogsmede, Tom Riddle went on a five-minute killing spree beginning in the Leaky Cauldron. As Tom was at the Order meeting his long time assistant, Nob was behind the bar, saw Voldemort walk in and had the good sense to immediately duck down into the beer cellar. His uncharacteristically quick thinking saved his life.

Riddle left four dead in the pub and immediately went to the office of the Daily Prophet. The only three people at that time of night were Cheryl Whiteheart, a self-styled Rita Skeeter wannabe, and the two printers.

"Crucio." Whiteheart went out like a light screaming in agony. In an act of either extreme bravery or absolute stupidity Gordon and

Dundee fired stunners at the intruder, not knowing that they were firing at Lord Voldemort himself.

Riddle put a full-body bind on Gordon and an instant later cast "Imperio" on Dundee. A moment later, Riddle revived Whiteheart and said, "You will get quite a story this evening." He handed Whiteheart the camera that was on her desk and said, "Watch this." A moment later Dundee picked up the ink-spreading blade that was in the ink bucket and slit his workmate of 22 years' throat with it. Riddle had Whiteheart take several photos of the dying man, himself and the man who had just killed his friend then told the shaking witch to sit down.

As calmly as if he were ordering dinner, Riddle told Whiteheart, "You will tell that sniveling editor Reggie McDonald that defying me is a very unhealthy practice. Can you do that?"

The terrified reported nodded. She was scared witless and expected Dundee or herself to be murdered at any moment. Instead, Riddle recast the body binding spell immobilizing both of them and calmly walked out the door. He took his time walking to Ollivander's old shop then cast the killing curse at a young wizard who happened to be walking down the street at the wrong time. Riddle cast the Dark Mark over the Daily Prophet building and waited until he heard the tell tale sound of Aurors apparating in. He cast the killing curse at one of the Aurors and enveloped a cloud of smoke around himself before disappearing. As planned the Aurors would spend the next twenty minutes searching the alley for a wizard who was already gone. By the time they were certain that he was gone, Hogsmede would be sacked.

... --- ...

Chapter 12

Moody had just finished talking Harry into buying the second round of the evening as they continued their discussion about the fighting strategies used at the wedding when the screaming started.

Moody used his magical eye to see that there were hundreds of dementors outside feasting on anyone unlucky enough to be on the street. Harry did three things while Moody was assessing the situation. He checked his wand holster as he opened the case containing the sword that he knew would see use in the coming minutes. He also hit the keys for Minister Abraxan on his cell phone and handed it to Alyx and told her, "Tell the Minister that we'll need some help and a lot of healers."

Most of the group got ready to burst out the back door of the pub casting their Patronus forms as Harry got ready to open the front door. He told Rosmerta to lock the door behind him, not to open it for anyone and ran out.

... --- ...

Remus had had his group do almost the same thing a few streets away. Six of the people in his team managed to get a Patronus form cast. The forms, whether by plan or not, seemed to push the hideous creatures towards Harry.

Lavender and Ernie Macmillan made the mistake of going out the front door of the Hogs Head pub. Ernie was almost immediately lifted up by one of the creatures while Lavender ran flat out down the street screaming. Ten seconds later, the sated dementor put the soul-less teen down and went to find another victim.

... --- ...

After contacting Abraxan, Alyx did an incredibly foolish thing. She ran out the door that Harry had gone out of a minute before. Harry had been able to slice a dozen of the dementors but was slowly being overwhelmed by the sound of his mother screaming.

Alyx cast her Patronus form and the horse galloped around momentarily driving the dementors away that were clutching at Harry with their deathly hands. It gave Harry the breather that he needed to continue with his work. Unfortunately the dementors immediately went after the Auror cadet. Harry returned the favor, and stabbed three of the twelve foot dementors who were forced to release Alyx before anything could happen. Her robes were badly torn as she fell revealing a stunningly beautiful young woman, but Harry didn't have the time to enjoy the magnificent view. A dementor had picked him up causing him to drop his sword.

Harry pulled his wand from his arm holster and focused every thought that he could muster. "Expecto Patronum." A large jet of silver vapor flew from his wand at the dementor causing the twelve-foot monster to drop him onto the ground.

Harry found his sword and stabbed at the beast before it could pick him up again.

... --- ...

Behind the Three Broomsticks, Moody ran smack into Pettigrew. Moody cast several stunning spells and encased Pettigrew in an unbreakable container. Seconds later Mulciber hit Parvati with the killing curse. Dolohov sliced Aberforth with his purple flame-cutting spell before running down the street. Unlike the others, Dolohov remembered that their job was not to engage the villagers, rather to finish off the wounded.

A dozen dementors came at the embattled group and began reaching for them. Unable to cast a Patronus, Moody ignited a large branch that he'd been able to grab and waved it like a brandished sword, temporarily keeping the beasts away. While that was happening, Mulciber fired another curse at the group hitting a bystander before following Dolohov.

... --- ...

Remus' group had made their way halfway to the Three Broomsticks and saw Alyx and Harry making a defensive stand against a dozen

dementors. Mooney could see his young friend rapidly being overwhelmed and fired his Patronus directly at him. The silver wolf flew out of Lupin's wand and charged at the dementors. Harry and Alyx seemed to find strength from the forms and began fighting again.

Harry, again momentarily heartened by the happy feeling emitting from the Patronus form, held his hand out to help Alyx up. Unfortunately she was grabbed by two dementors who seemed intent on feasting on her. Harry ran his sword through one, pulled it from the mucky mess and rammed it into the other. Alyx screamed and Harry was certain that he'd cut her in the process.

Lupin called to his group to cast their Patronus forms on either side of the two. A silver cat and an eagle flew to the pair illuminating both of them in the growing darkness.

... --- ...

While the Order members were fighting furiously at the north end of town, the hellish beasts were feasting on the southern half of the village. Snape and Lucius were blasting doors open followed by the beasts who devoured those unlucky enough to be inside. Within five minutes a hundred villagers had been kissed or murdered by the Death Eaters. Folgard's Wizarding Exchange had been emptied of a considerable amount of gold, though several of the Death Eaters seemed more interested in the currency trader's three daughters than any additional gold.

... --- ...

Neville saw the jet of green light coming at him, took a step back and miraculously tripped on one of the empty cloaks falling backward, unconscious, but alive.

Ten minutes into the battle the street was littered with an unholy mixture of soul-less witches and wizards, cloaks and dead bodies.

... --- ...

Moody's group was exhausted but unable to disengage from the dementors who had pinned them down. The dozen dementors and the half dozen wizards had about reached a standoff with the dementors edging ever closer to the exhausted witches and wizards. With so many dementors around, none of them could cast a Patronus.

They didn't have another five minutes to hold out. As Kingsley passed out from the effects of the dementors, Moody began counting down the last seconds of his life.

... --- ...

Lupin's group finally reached Harry and Alyx. Harry was virtually in a daze, but heard Remus shout, "Where are the others?" as he shoved a hunk of chocolate into Harry's mouth. After a few seconds Lupin's words made sense to Harry and he muttered, "They went out the back of the Three Broomsticks. Cast your forms on that side of the building, and I'll go around the other side. Then do your best to get people safely inside."

Remus had no better plan and gave Harry a ten second head start and told his team, "Cast now. Expecto Patronum." A silver eagle, a cat and a wolf flew out of their wands along with a few jets of formless vapor. The forms reached the dementors that had been holding Moody and crew down. The forms charged the dementors chasing them into Harry who cut four of them before they floated by him.

Moments later Lupin met up with Moody, and stuffed chocolate into Fred and George and as Bill revived the others.

... --- ...

Minutes earlier Abraxan had received the frantic call from the Auror cadet saying that the village of Hogsmede was under attack. Alyx hadn't pressed the END button before putting the cellular telephone back into her robe pocket.

Abraxan called for her aide to gather any Aurors in the Ministry building to go to Hogsmede. Unfortunately the Aurors had all left the

building to respond to the attack at Diagon alley. They wouldn't be back for half an hour.

Moments later, Abraxan called to two other aides to get to St. Mungo's and immediately summon as many Mediwitches as possible to head to Hogsmede.

... --- ...

Roberta Evans was a second year trainee at St. Mungo's. Most of the night staff was made up of the second and third year healer trainees and a few older supervisors. When Abraxan's aide dashed into the door and explained that Minister Abraxan had requested that all of the available Mediwitches apparate immediately to Hogsmede, Evans responded.

Thirty seconds later Evans and eight Mediwitches were ready. Carrying the wizarding version of crash carts with them, they left for Hogsmede unaware that they would be apparating into the middle of a fire that was still raging.

... --- ...

Hermione thought it was a bit irresponsible for the other groups to be out drinking under the pretext of holding a serious meeting. Professor Flitwick told the rest of the research group that he'd completed his search of the castle library. Diggle had made some discrete inquiries at the Beaubatons library in the last week, but had found nothing on the topic. He was currently investigating some vanishing stories. Hermione briefed the others about the concept of Horcruxes. Padma thought she sounded a bit like Binns, carrying on with seemingly endless detail.

Poppy began the battlefield healing section of the meeting when they were interrupted by Lavender who had run the entire way to the castle. "There's been an attack at Hogsmede...There's lots of wounded," she panted as she gasped for air. She had never run so fast in her life.

It was Poppy's turn to take control. "Lavender, what sort of attack?"

“Dementors... There were hundreds of them... And Death Eaters too, I think.”

Before anyone could say anything else, Hermione was out the door, racing for the stairs. ‘Not again! Please no, not again.’ In the last attack she had lost one of her best friends, and Ron was in prison. Now Harry was all she had left in the magical world. She just couldn’t bear to lose him too. She had not been able to shake the feeling that Ginny’s death was partly her fault, and here she was at the castle, out of the fight, unable to do anything again.

Poppy went into command mode. “Stop her even if you have to stun her. Filius, charm the castle doors closed.” Casting the Sonorus charm, she called, “Hermione, stop where you are!”

Never had she had such an authoritative look on her face. Catching up with the frustrated teen who, due to the locked doors, had nowhere to go. She said, “Hermione, you will not get killed on my watch. You are in charge of research, I am in charge of keeping my Mediwitch trainees alive in battlefield conditions. Have I made myself clear?”

Suddenly feeling like a first year again, she replied, “Yes Ma’am.”

“Hermione, If there are indeed hundreds of dementors out there, your running smack into them and getting yourself kissed will not help. I broke Molly and Arthur’s heart making the final arrangements for Ginny and Percy. I refuse to have to have such a horrible conversation with your parents if I can help it. Do I have your word that you won’t try and leave?”

“Yes Ma’am. I’m sorry.” In spite of her frustration, Hermione knew that the Master Healer was right.

Poppy’s face softened, and she said, “OK. I’m certain that they’ll come back soon. I need your help now. OK?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“OK then, Filius floo the Ministry and let them know that there has been a large attack. Hermione, Luna, Tom, Molly, Lavender and Padma wait by the door to stretcher anyone who arrives up to the hospital wing. The rest of you follow me up to the wing. We’ll need blood restorative, pain potion...” It was obvious why she had been awarded the rank of Master Healer.

At the doors to the castle, they hurried up and waited.

... --- ...

Natasha Abraxan knew that it would be irresponsible for her to leave the safety of her office. Scrimgeour had added adequate safety features so that she could truly lock herself in. She listened in morbid fascination as Cadet Alyx went into the street. Abraxan could hear the screams of the villagers through the still-active cellular telephone. She could hear the shouting and chaos as well as the unholy sounds of the slain dementors as they let out their last breath.

She bit her lip as she heard the frantic screams of Alyx getting picked up by the dementors only to be dropped moments later. Abraxan was greatly relieved to hear the young cadet being helped up a moment later and thank someone. She heard Alyx cast a Patronus charm and could also hear Harry Potter in the background fighting.

For a minute there was silence, then sobbing.

Fearing the worst, but hoping for the best, the High Priestess prayed and waited.

... --- ...

Tonks dashed down the street after one of the Death Eaters only to find herself with McNair and two dementors swooping up to her from the rear. McNair said, “Stupid girl. Take in your last breath.”

Apparently the spirited Auror wanted a victory more than the ex-Ministry employee. As he cast Dolohov’s trademark fire slashing spell, Tonks sidestepped it in an amazing display of grace and cast

Reducto, hitting McNair on the side of the face. The blast shattered his jaw and left his right ear on the street.

Rather than fight an unwinnable battle, the badly wounded Death Eater apparated away. As Tonks watched McNair disappear, she was grabbed by a large rotting hand.

... --- ...

While the others were fighting as they knew best, Minerva was transfiguring barricades for the wounded to hide behind. Unfortunately it had been a warm evening and it seemed like most of the village had been outdoors when the attack started.

From a relatively safe position she watched as Potter and a few of the others risked their lives over and over to help someone or fight off the dementors. A lifetime of folklore regarding the invincibility of dementors was vanishing before her eyes as she saw cloak after cloak littering the street.

Suddenly she felt herself being lifted by one of the long, rotting hands. She screamed and a second later was on the ground with an empty cloak by her side.

“Be careful there, Professor,” panted Potter, not wanting to lose anyone else.

“Ten thousand points to Gryffindor, Mr. Potter,” said McGonagall helping herself up to her feet as Potter had already ran off.

Thirty yards to her right, Sturgis Podmore was not so lucky. Ten seconds after being grabbed, the dementor set him down with an expressionless look on his face.

... --- ...

Fred and George ran to Alberforth’s side. Neither knew a thing about first aid, but did what they could to keep the old saloonkeeper alive. They both felt indebted to the Headmaster’s brother for continually forgetting to check IDs when they had begun going to Hogsmede

beginning when they were thirteen. He had lost a lot of blood from a large gash on his leg. Fred did his best to close the wound and bind it up with a filthy bar rag that Aberforth had in his bartender apron.

Fred held the old wizard while George fired stunners at anyone who got close. George had noticed Moody fending the dementors off with a flaming branch. He summoned a bottle of Ogden's from the Hogs Head as he transfigured a twig into an eight foot 2x4. Pouring half of the liquor on the end of the lumber, George looked to the grey face of Aberforth and said, "I know. 4 Galleons. On my tab." He lit the end of the board and used it to wave the dementors away.

... --- ...

It was the Mediwitches' practice to come in immediately after a fight had ended. In the past the call had come from Amelia Bones or Connie Hammer. The Mediwitches had no means of defending themselves.

As such they were highly surprised to have apparated into a full-bore firefight at Hogsmode, and terrified to realize that they were smack in the middle of it. Moments after the nine witches had arrived, three had been grabbed by the rotting hands of the dementors.

The others were powerless to help as three of their number faced death with bulging eyes and flailing arms as the foul beasts lowered their hoods. Roberta fell five feet upon being released by a dementor. She landed badly and broke an ankle, then was surrounded in blackness as her attacker's cloak fell on top of her.

Harry had rushed the dementors, swinging his sword in broad cutting strokes. Within seconds four of the foul creatures had disappeared and the other six Mediwitches scurried to safety not realizing that Roberta was missing.

... --- ...

Lucius and Draco were in different buildings at the south end of town. The older Malfoy had come and gone several times transporting large sacks of gold back to the dark Lord's headquarters. After the third trip

back, Lucius called to Draco and Snape to gather what they could and leave. Their objective was a robbery. The others could murder and pillage as they chose to.

The older Malfoy and the former spy were seconds ahead of Draco. Snape had gathered up four large sacks of gold and disappeared. Lucius took two more and left.

As Draco was leaving, Lupin hit him with a Reducto charm, blasting the arrogant wanker's manhood half way to Honeydukes. There would be no heirs to the Malfoy line. Unfortunately, Draco managed to apparate away, before Lupin could grab him.

... --- ...

Vincent Crabbe and Greg Goyle did not fare as well. Acting with their usual level of finesse, they had just finished attacking two of Folgard's daughters, and were cleaning themselves up before walking out the door. Their last thoughts leaked down their robes as the teenaged girls' eleven-year-old sister blasted them with a shotgun that the trader had kept in their home.

The little girl ran to her sisters and they huddled together, as shock set in.

... --- ...

As she was being picked up, Tonks summoned all of the love that she felt for Remus, called the charm and a two-foot chameleon flew from her wand crawling on the dementor. The anguished dementor let her drop and floated off.

Tonks hit her head on the pavement, and began bleeding badly. She cast a sealing charm, but was too weak to get on her feet. She lay there hoping that no one else would attack her and that the battle would end soon.

... --- ...

Harry knew that the battle would end within minutes and dashed off like a man possessed. He began slashing every dementor that he could reach, screaming, "Go back to Azkaban, or I'll kill you all." He took another swing and hit two more of the hellish beasts and chased after another until nearly blind Ernie Prang dropped him with a stunner to the head, mistaking him for a Death Eater. In the last two minutes Harry had managed to send another 18 dementors back to the hell where they had been spawned.

The last dementor turned back as Harry fell to the ground. If that cursed swordbearer could be kissed, the threat to his brethren might be eliminated. It silently glided up to the unconscious youth and lowered its hood.

"Expecto Patronum!" A silver pit bull flew at the dementor, driving it away. Its chance lost, it drifted away after its fellows.

"Potter! Are you all right?" It was Moody limping up to him. "I saw Prang hit you by mistake. If he can't see twenty feet, how the hell does he drive that stupid bus?"

"Dunno. Thanks."

"Yea. No worries. Be more careful next time, and thanks. You're a good man, Potter." It had been many years since Moody was that generous with his praise.

"So are you Moody, so are you."

... --- ...

For a moment there was silence, before everyone realized that the fighting had ended. The next phase, which would be equally gruesome, was that of trying to save the lives of the badly wounded. The remaining healers and Mediwitches gathered those kissed and the wounded together. They soon realized that there were far too many who had been kissed and far too few who were merely wounded. Fortunately a breeze came up which blew the disgusting stench of the slain dementors away.

Within an hour, there were nearly a hundred Ministry personnel on site. Based on the preliminary findings nearly 200 villagers had been kissed, 25 murdered, and about 80 were wounded or had injured themselves.

Another 56 of the dementors had been destroyed. 4 Death Eaters lay dead in the street and 4 had been sent to the holding cells.

The remaining dementors were on their way back to Azkaban Island to await their fate. The ancient band had lost a third of their number in the last week, and had no desire to be eliminated from the Earth by the one wielding the fabled sword.

... --- ...

As the Aurors were gathering the cloaks of the dementors they were amazed to find Roberta hidden under one, badly bruised and unable to walk. Shacklebolt yelled, "We need a mediwitch here. We've got a live one."

Roberta was happy beyond words at being reunited with her colleagues. She was so grateful to be alive that she refused to be embarrassed about being stretchered in by her sister Mediwitches.

On the way in, she asked, "What happened?"

The old mediwitch guiding her stretcher just smiled at her and said, "It will be a story you can tell your grandchildren, Roberta. You were saved from the very jaws of death by Mr. Harry Potter himself."

Suddenly a broken ankle and lacerations didn't seem so bad.

... --- ...

As Lupin was trudging back up from the south end of the town, he spotted a shock of pink hair on the ground. Hurrying forward he found Tonks lying unconscious, blood caked to her head, but still alive. Nearly dizzy with relief, he picked her up and staggered to his feet, heading for the Mediwitches.

Moody and the others collected themselves outside the Three Broomsticks after the wounded had been all sent to the castle. They helped each other up to leave. As they were going, Madam Rosmerta handed them each a bottle to carry with them, saying, "I'm sorry that your evening was interrupted. Come back anytime on me." The old Auror cracked a genuine smile at these words as Bill helped him up. Moody was carrying Wormtail in a smaller unbreakable container after he had tried to sneak off in his rat form. Moody had no faith in the Ministry at the moment, and would deliver Pettigrew personally, clearing Black's name at the same time.

They limped back to the castle refusing any offers of assistance. Several people began clapping as they walked by. Soon others took up the cheer and their emotions soared as they slowly made their way back to the castle. The village had lost a fourth of its population, but the others knew that without the help that they'd received, they would all be among those mourned. By the time they made it to the doors, most of the bottles were nearly empty.

They were all glad that Minister Abraxan had arrived shortly after the end of the fighting and done a fantastic job keeping the reporters away from the militia. It grieved her to the bone that so many witches wizards and children had been lost, but she also realized that 700 people had been saved. She would try to meet with Potter and Moody the next day. The four Death Eaters who had been arrested had most likely eaten their last dinner. She would be swift with their justice.

Those that had been kissed would most likely be euthanized in the next day or so, after they were properly identified and their families had the opportunity to say their goodbyes. It was a lesser of evils in terms of fate for them, and there was no way to put a good spin on it.

Abraxan was torn up inside that so many families had been ripped apart. She renewed her vows to do everything within her power to put a quick stop to this madness.

... --- ...

Hermione and the research team began shuttling the wounded to the hospital wing as fast as they could move them. Soon they were joined

by the rest of the research team as the Mediwitches joined Poppy treat the patients. Minutes passed as more and more of the villagers were brought in, but she still hadn't seen anyone from the Order. Hermione grew more and more anxious as the minutes ticked by. "Where are they?" she said to no one in particular.

Hermione had been helping levitate patients up the stairs to the hospital wing, and hadn't seen any of the other Order members. She helped another injured person, this one in a Mediwitches uniform up to the hospital wing. She asked, "Did you see? Never mind." The Order wasn't wearing uniforms and describing them would be senseless.

She wasn't surprised to hear Roberta say, "Harry Potter saved me."

Hermione smiled at her as she helped Roberta into one of the few remaining beds. She simply replied, "He does that sort of thing."

She came back to the great oak doors to see Harry, Alyx and the others sitting on the floor, resting against the cool stone walls. Harry was talking with McGonagall. She raced down the rest of the steps and threw her arms around him. "I'm so glad to see you. Are you hurt?"

Harry hugged her back. "Hurting. The dementors got so many of the villagers. I couldn't get all of them."

She sat down next to Harry and turned her attention to Alyx. Susan came by a few minutes later and saw Hermione helping the cadet trying to mend her tattered clothing. Susan had a curious look on her face and said, "I'll help her Hermione. You can look after the others."

Other than Neville and Tonks, none of the others were really hurt, just exhausted. Hermione helped Harry to his feet last and remained by him, resting her head on his shoulder, both of them drawing comfort from each other. With one arm wrapped around her, he used the other to pick up the sword, disgusting black goo still wet on the blade, cleaned it off and returned it to its case. Susan helped Alyx up and said, "Why don't you come home with us tonight. It's late and there's

plenty of room.” There really wasn’t anything else to do and none of them felt like answering questions or filling out paperwork.

Remus said. “I’ll go up and check on Tonks. I’ll probably stay here for the night.”

After saying goodnight to the others, the four of them walked out of the oaken doors into the night air, activated the portkey that they’d been given and vanished.

It had been a long day.

... --- ...

Chapter 13

Wednesday evening

As Hermione was shuttling the wounded up to the hospital wing, Riddle was doing his best to keep his wounded Death Eaters alive. Most healers would have considered Walden McNair's shattered face to be a mortal wound. He had suffered considerable blood loss, as had the Malfoy boy. Riddle had found truly loyal followers possessing competence to be truly rare, and didn't want to lose McNair. Malfoy's son Draco would experience a different fate. In all his years as a Dark Lord, no one had ever stolen from him before. Riddle was still vacillating between admiration of the teen's sheer guts and the desire to put a large hook in him and feed him to the fish in the ocean as a warning to the others to never cross him.

Riddle used his wand to cauterize both of the wounds while Snape quickly made a dozen units of blood restorative potion. As the potion was brewing, he split what was available in hopes of keeping both of them alive. In reality they both might die from their wounds before the other batches were ready.

The raid had netted him 290,000 Galleons. It was more than he'd expected, but less than he needed to wage an extended war. Unfortunately the cost had been greater than he could afford to sustain. Eight Death Eaters failed to return. So had the dementors, but they hadn't come back last time until he'd summoned them back.

The reports on the fate of the villagers that he received from the Death Eaters were unreliable and not of much use. He would get a copy of the Daily Prophet over the next few days and see what was reported. He also wanted to see if his little discussion with the reporter Whiteheart and the editor McDonald from the Daily Prophet office had been effective.

He was hopeful that the dementors may have kissed 300-500 residents before his Death Eaters apparated away. If so, the Ministry would almost certainly sue for some sort of settlement. Riddle had respected Scrimgeour as a leader, but had no real knowledge of Abraxan. What wasn't clear was how those that hadn't returned were

captured and why so few returned. At that moment he counted eleven Death Eaters, two of which were badly wounded. Fortunately of the eleven who had returned, Severus Snape, Walden McNair, Peter Travers, Lucius Malfoy, Rabastan Lestrangle, Antonin Dolohov, Thomas Nott, Thomas Crabbe and Luis Mulciber had served him since the first war.

Riddle realized that more than ever, he needed to find and repatriate the captured Death Eaters. He would act on the information that Wormtail had given him, even if it meant venturing to Azkaban Island alone.

Tom Boyl and Draco Malfoy were new in the last year, but both were competent. Seeing the nature of Draco's wounds, Riddle decided that he would wait and torture the teen after he had healed.

As the hours passed, and it became apparent that McNair would live, Riddle made him a right side for his face out of the same molten silver material as he had done with Wormtail's hand. In the end, he looked like something out of one of the Terminator movies, but he was healed and stronger than ever. Malfoy wouldn't be so lucky. Due to the nature of his wounds he would come to understand the difference between a pointer and a setter.

... --- ...

At 7:00 the next morning Harry got of bed, still sore from the night before. He put on a pair of slate gray trousers and a white dress shirt over his dragon hide armor that he decided was his fate to always wear. He knew that most of the day would be filled up with meetings that couldn't be avoided.

When the four of them had returned the previous night they had gone straight upstairs. After releasing Harry and giving him one last hug, Hermione had stopped briefly to let her parents know what had happened before going to her own room. Susan had asked Dobby to put Alyx in the room next to hers.

This morning Emma and Dan were in the kitchen trying unsuccessfully to get the little elves to please let them help with

something around the house. Emma saw Harry first and said, "Good morning Harry. Busy night last night?" She didn't smother him like Mrs. Weasley would, but he knew her to be a very genuine person.

Harry nodded and smiled sadly. He looked at the Daily Prophet. In surprisingly small letters, the headline read,

Lord Voldemort Attacks Daily Prophet Offices.

Lord Voldemort entered the offices of the Daily Prophet last evening and talked with this reporter. In a small display of his power he calmly walked into the Daily Prophet offices on Diagon Alley and effortlessly tortured this reporter mercilessly for several minutes.

Then he proceeded to illustrate his mastery of mind control by causing Daily Prophet Master Printer Richard Dundee to murder his life-long friend and workmate Larry Gordon.

The article went on to describe both acts in detail then had another nearly full page about the "battle" in Diagon Alley in which the former Ollivanders site was destroyed. There were a half dozen photos of Riddle and the murder scene at the Prophet.

Harry was surprised that Riddle had let the reporter live. To his knowledge, prior to the photos that he'd taken in his pensieve, there had been no photos published of Riddle. Apparently he had wanted the story published.

Emma handed him The Quibbler next. It didn't mention the Diagon Alley attack, rather had headlines about Hogsmeade. Harry looked at them.

Massive Dementor Attack in Hogsmeade

(Harry Potter and friends drive dementors from Hogsmeade and save the village)

Last night the Village of Hogsmeade was the scene of the largest battle of the wizarding world's war against the current dark lord, the wizard who calls himself Voldemort. Though there was serious loss of

life of the villagers, Harry Potter and a group of his friends who were in the village having a pint staved off the attack killing nearly 60 of the foul dementors before driving them off.

Others assisted by waving flaming brands at the creatures to keep them at bay and helping other residents to safety. Three Broomsticks Proprietor Rosmerta Masters was quoted saying, "A big group of those dementors had gathered to attack the village. With the help of Mr. Potter and those other brave folk, the streets were covered with the empty cloaks of dementors that Mr. Potter had killed. I saw one brave witch, an Auror Cadet I believe, dash out and do her very best to save ordinary folk. It was one of the most courageous things I'd ever seen. Not just the Aurors, but others fought back against those scum who called themselves Death Eaters. They're a bunch of cowards if you ask me. More like little boys hiding behind masks."

It seemed that robbery was the real motive for the raid. Folgard's currency exchange shop appeared to be the primary target. Four Death Eaters were killed by citizens fighting back. They've been identified as Vincent Crabbe, Greg Goyle, Tomas Duncan and Dale Duncan. Minister of Magic Natasha Abraxan was quoted as saying, "The dementors did cause regrettable loss of life and we will all be praying for those who lost family members. We should also be thankful that the Wizarding population has had enough of the Death Eaters and decided to fight back. Those Death Eaters that were captured will doubtless reveal plenty of useful information."

The names of the captured Death Eater weren't released.

The rest of the paper also showed photos, but the slant was entirely different. It showed the Unspeakables holding up the empty cloaks, the rather large pile of empty cloaks, a picture of a mediwitch on a stretcher making the V sign that PM Churchill was famous for during the Second World War.

Dan looked at Harry and said, "So you were out having a few pints with your mates after your meeting last night. Then what happened?"

Harry had just begun his story when Hermione came down, sat next to him and said, "Please start over Harry. I'd like to hear too."

Harry explained the overall situation as best that he could. He really didn't know the statistics and commented, "It's strange that they weren't reported in the Quibbler."

Emma replied, "Maybe they didn't have the final counts by the time that they had to go to press."

Harry shook his head and said, "Maybe, but I think they chose to omit the numbers. The dementors must have gotten about 200 of the villagers. Another dozen or so were murdered by the Death Eaters, and maybe as many as a hundred villagers were wounded."

"Less than that," replied Hermione. "There are only 25 beds in the hospital wing. They were full by the time we left. Madam Pomfrey and the other Healers probably treated and released another 50, but the total number was well under 100."

Just then Susan and Cadet Alyx came into the kitchen. Alyx was still a bit unsteady on her feet and Susan was holding her arm to steady her. Winky pulled out two of the chairs for them and said, "Good morning, Miss Susan. Good morning Miss. I is Winky. I'm Harry Potter Sir's house elf. What can I get you for breakfast?"

Susan smiled and said, "Good morning Winky. This is Alyx. I'll have coffee, juice, bangers and pancakes. Alyx?"

"I'll have the same if it's not too much trouble. Thank you Winky." The young cadet didn't take Harry's hospitality for granted and looked over at him.

Harry was still tired and slow to make the introductions. Hermione said, "Alyx, these are my parents, Dr. Dan and Dr. Emma Granger."

"Just Emma," said Emma. "Were you injured last night?"

"Just bumped and bruised really. Mr. Potter saved me a few times."

“He does that,” replied Emma. He has that “Saving people thing,” the three women chorused in together smiling at him. They each gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Actually Alyx is a great person to have watching your back in a fight,” said Harry, his face flaming from the unexpected attention. “She’s really quick on her feet.”

“Coming from you, that’s quite a compliment,” said Susan.

“She was probably more help to me than I was to her. Her Patronus charm really helped last night. It saved lives.”

“You looked pretty banged up when I saw you, Alyx,” said Hermione. “Your robes were ...” she paused, realizing that this might be embarrassing.

“Yeah, there wasn’t much left of them,” the Auror Cadet admitted, only slightly flustered. “I guess I really put on a show,” she said, glancing sheepishly over at Harry.

Harry swallowed hard, his face going red again. While he hadn’t noticed during the battle, sitting in the castle next to Alyx afterwards had afforded him a magnificent view of her assets. He had been relieved first that McGonagall had engaged him in conversation, then when Hermione had come and sat between him and Alyx and started mending her robes. Hermione smiled at the discomfort of her honorable friend, but was surprised to see Susan blushing too. Clearing her throat she tried again.

“Anyway,” she continued, “What happened?”

I was helping Harry in front of the Three Broomsticks. Two dementors grabbed me and picked me up. One lowered its hood. It was disgusting. Suddenly they dropped me and I landed badly, but Harry picked me up. You killed both of them, didn’t you?” she asked.

Harry nodded, but didn’t say anything else. He took no pleasure in killing.

Alyx said, "He told the dementors to go back to Azkaban, or he'd kill them all. Then they just... left."

"Did you really?" asked Hermione, clearly impressed.

"I suppose," replied Harry. "I doubt that they'd listen to me though."

"How many were destroyed?" asked Emma using as much tact as she could.

"I heard 56," said Susan, "but I don't know for sure."

"How many were at the wedding?" asked Dan.

"About 200," replied Hermione. "They're said to be an ancient creature predating the school. There's not too much information about them. We don't know for certain if it's Harry, or Harry's sword that can kill them, or any sword. There are no recorded deaths of dementors prior to the wedding."

"I expect if it were any sword, they'd have been wiped out a long time ago," said Harry. "Then again, being wrong about that wouldn't be very much fun." He got up and put his dishes in the sink then went back and gathered the others, with Winky giving him an exasperated house elfish look. He said "I have to go see the Minister this morning, then Professor McGonagall wanted to me to have lunch with her."

"Harry, just a moment," said Emma. She went with him out in the hallway and said, "It would look better if you wore a grey shirt over your vest." She made a move to smooth his hair, but realized that as it was longer, it took care of itself.

Harry said, "Thanks Emma." He smiled at her, and went up to take her advice. He recognized that she had fantastic taste in clothing.

As Harry finished changing, Hermione knocked on the door and stepped inside. "You said you were going to see the Minister. Are you going to ask about Ron?"

“Among other things,” Harry said. “He was the first friend I ever had, Hermione. I have to try to do something.” He ran his hand through his hair, clearly troubled.

Hermione could see the anguish he was in and moved forward and took his arm. At that point Brigid trilled from her perch near Harry’s bed. As intended, the phoenix song helped to lift the spirits of the downhearted teens.

“He was the second friend I ever had,” Hermione said looking straight into Harry’s eyes. “Even though we argued all the time, I still care for him a lot.” She dropped her gaze and continued softly, almost as though she was speaking to herself. “I don’t think things would ever have worked out between us. We were just too different.” She looked back up at Harry. “I know you’ll do whatever you can. Good luck.” She reached up and gave him another kiss on the cheek, then turned and left the room. Harry stared after her for a while, thinking about friendship, and feeling grateful that he still had at least one of his best friends.

... --- ...

Poppy was discharging most of her patients today. The only ones left were Tonks who’d had some cranial hemorrhaging and Aberforth with a nasty gash on his left leg. At 151 years old, even wizards tended to heal more slowly. She smiled at Remus who was sitting faithfully by the young Auror’s side. After the others had been sent on their way, Poppy came over and asked, “Miss Tonks, how are you feeling today?”

The spirited Auror replied, “Like I’ve been run over by a herd of hippogriffs, but actually that’s quite an improvement from last night. Thank you for helping me.”

The master healer appreciated being recognized for doing her part too. She replied, “No problem. Go get dressed when you are ready. Then you can leave.”

“What about me?” asked Aberforth.

“You’ll be here through the weekend, you old goat. Take your potion and go back to sleep.”

“What about my pub?”

Pomfrey shook her head and gave him a menacing look. “If that filthy rag that you had on was any indication, I’d do better sending the house elves over to straighten it up while you’re here. Now go to sleep or your next potion will be delivered preceded by an enema wash.”

... --- ...

At nine Harry was shown into Minister Abraxan’s private office. They both stood for a moment then shook hands as friends, taking each other in. Natasha looked younger than her years, Harry much older than his.

She started, “I would ask how you’ve been, Mr. Potter, but I had the unfortunate experience of hearing it first hand last night via your cellular telephone. I can only say, thank you.”

Harry replied, “It was the right thing to do, but there were a lot of people who fought bravely last night. Cadet Alyx, Alastor, Auror Tonks and Shacklebolt each saved many lives last night.” There surely were others.” It wasn’t his intention to name all of the names of the Order members, but he made sure to single out the Aurors present.

“You are doubtless correct Harry. Tell me please, how were you able to destroy the attacking dementors?”

“I was given a sword that was originally owned by Godric Gryffindor. Dementors that are stabbed with it turn to dust and goo and then disappear. Minister, there is a possibility that the rest of the dementors left Voldemort’s service last night and returned to Azkaban Island.”

Astonished, Abraxan asked, “What makes you think such a thing?”

“Well, I told them to right before they floated away.”

She looked at him carefully and said, “I see. I shall ask several of the Aurors to visit the Island and see for themselves.” She wasn’t sure if she was seeing the myth, a teenager, or the greatest leader in the making that the wizarding light side had ever known.

Still feeling guilty about the night before Harry asked, “Minister, how many families live in Hogsmeade?”

She replied, “About three hundred.” She wasn’t certain of the current number.

“So at least half of the families were affected somehow. What can be done to help them?”

“Let’s come back to that.” She opened the door to her private restroom and came back a moment later holding a glass container that Alastor Moody had given her. Looking at it she asked, “Harry, is this the wizard who betrayed your parents, Peter Pettigrew?”

Harry looked at the rat in the container carefully and replied, “Yes Minister. Notice the silver paw on his front right hand.”

She looked at it and noticed it for the first time. Then she asked, “Harry have you personally witnessed Pettigrew commit any crimes?”

“Yes Minister. He murdered Cedric Diggory on Voldemort’s order. I personally witnessed it.”

“Thank you, Mr. Potter. I will take care of it. That said, Sirius Black will have his name cleared, if only posthumously. The ministry is prepared to set up a two million Galleon non-profit relief organization in his name, specifically to handle the current and future needs of those who have suffered serious loss at Voldemort’s hands or at his order.”

“Thank you, Minister. I know a wizard, Remus Lupin who knows a spell to make him change back. Professor Lupin used to teach at Hogwarts. He was very good.”

"I'll keep that in mind. What else can I do for you, Mr. Potter?"

Believing that he already knew the answer based on his earlier conversations with Moody, Harry asked, "What can be done for Ron Weasley?"

"Unfortunately very little. The minimum sentencing law is quite clear and cannot be revoked retroactively. The law was put in place to keep a corrupt Ministry from letting Death Eaters off with just a fine. He will have his wand snapped, and his memory modified. He will have no recollections or remembrances of magic or the magical world. He will wake up with only muggle memories, but he will be seventeen, and have a full life in front of him to live. He can have no contact with the Wizarding world and will be banished from Britain. He'll have a caseworker assigned to him to help him transition into living life as a muggle. If you're right about the dementors, even the minimum sentence of ten years in Azkaban for gross carelessness resulting in a death would effectively be a death sentence. If you'd like I can arrange a family visit before the trial."

Harry nodded. He was choking up inside, but didn't want to break down in front of the Minister of Magic.

"You would of course be welcome to accompany them. I am sorry Harry. I know he's your friend. However the law is very specific in this case."

Trying to find some way to help his friend, Harry asked, "Would I be allowed to start a savings account in his name?"

"Yes. That would be very generous of you. Barclays would be a good choice. They have a branch in Melbourne where he'll be sent and his observer is stationed. Your contacts at Gringotts can easily handle it for you. I suggest you set up some sort of trust, since a seventeen year old muggle might not be prepared to handle a great deal of money."

Harry nodded. Even as a wizard a seventeen year old Ron probably hadn't prepared to handle a lot of money. Thinking about his friend,

his throat tightened up again and he looked out of the window for a moment to collect himself. Finally he said, "I'll tell the Weasleys about the visit. When can they come?"

Abraxan smiled sadly and said, "I'll make the arrangements to have him come for the day to his parents' home from nine to one. Is that OK?"

It wasn't OK but it was probably the best that he or anyone could get. Abraxan explained how the caseworker was the equivalent of a parole officer in this case. She would be responsible to make certain that Ron didn't encounter any problems as he entered the muggle world. She looked thoughtful for a moment and said, "There may be something else you could do to help ease his transition to muggle life. You lived as a muggle yourself for many years, correct?" At Harry's perplexed nod she continued, "Let me talk to the memory adjustment wizards. I'll get back to you."

Harry nodded and Abraxan said, "I'll inform Arthur. I'm certain that they'd rather have their son come visit them at their home than sit in one of the Ministry holding cells." She stood and Harry knew that the meeting was over. Abraxan looked into Harry's emerald eyes and she smiled as she held out her hand.

Harry held out his and shook hers. He nodded and gently closed the door behind him. There were tears welled in his eyes as he left the Ministry building as fast as he could.

Harry took Ragnok's advice and set up an account for a million dollars Australian which was about two hundred thousand galleons. Ragnok handled the transaction personally, knowing that it would be awkward for Ron's brother Bill to be involved.

... --- ...

When Harry had talked to McGonagall at the beginning of the summer, he hadn't been sure if he would return to Hogwarts. In her conversation with him after the battle yesterday she had convinced him that the question of his attendance was bigger than he realized. Like it or not, as the leader of the light side his every action had an

effect on people's decisions. If he did not attend this year, a hundred or more other students might be kept from their education by fearful parents. She had assured him that she was prepared to do anything necessary to aid in his task and that he would have extraordinary latitude at school. The part of this he hated the most was going to be the interview that she had insisted was necessary to soothe the anxious parents.

With these thoughts in mind, Harry next apparated to the Hogsmeade station and quickly walked to the castle. He didn't want to talk to any one else that he didn't have to and wasn't ready to face the villagers. Mrs. Figg who had accepted the job of caretaker after Mr. Filch had resigned met him at the door. She smiled at him and said, "Good morning, Harry. How are you today?"

"Better, thank you. Are you...?" He wasn't quite certain what to ask.

"Yes. There was a position available here, and I accepted Professor McGonagall's offer. Besides, there was no longer any reason for me to stay at Privet Drive, and it was a bit out of the way for me."

They walked up to the headmaster's office. Minerva, who still hadn't changed the password, was there talking to a young reporter. She looked less than comfortable being with the reporter. Seeing him, she stood and quickly made the introductions. "Harry this is Kris Hamilton. She's a freelance reporter who is writing a story about the school."

Harry's smile was genuine. "Hello Ms. Hamilton. I'm pleased to meet you." As he was doing so, McGonagall was edging back slightly.

"The pleasure is mine, Mr. Potter. May I take a photo?"

Harry hesitated and replied, "This is really headmaster, er headmistress McGonagall's story. I'm simply here to offer an individual student's viewpoint. Perhaps one together?" He was glad that he'd discussed this earlier with Dan.

She took several. Then Minerva recalled that this was to be a lunch meeting, and Harry did look hungry. A little elf appeared with coffee, tea and butterbeers. Another came with sandwiches, crisps, and

salad. While they were eating, Harry casually said, "I think The Quibbler would be the best paper for this story, especially given the recent trouble at the Daily Prophet. I'm amazed that Voldemort let that reporter live after she made him witness one of her co-workers murdering the other one."

Harry had made it sound like an offhand remark, but Hamilton understood it to be work direction. She nodded, and replied, "They did rather well with another story featuring you a year or so ago."

Harry nodded.

Hamilton tried several times to steer the conversation back to the wedding and Hogsmeade attacks, but Harry kept on track. He had seen too much of Rita Skeeter's techniques. Finally Harry suggested, "Perhaps you are looking for two different articles Ma'am? Let's finish this one first. We can Floo Mr. Lovegood regarding the arrangements then I'll briefly discuss the others. Would that be OK?" Harry was not only grateful for the coaching that he'd received from Dan, but also some of the conversations that he'd had with the professor last year.

Harry explained the need from a student's perspective to receive a standardized magical education and in very general terms explained how the security had been breached last year and expressed his doubts that it would happen again. He talked of his confidence in professors such as Sprout, McGonagall and Flitwick to provide quality education and suggested that it would be best if parents kept their children in school.

McGonagall noted that he didn't mention Slughorn.

Hamilton commented, "That's a pretty strong endorsement, Mr. Potter. Let's talk about last night. How is it that you happened to be at Hogsmeade with your friends in the first place?"

Convinced that she wouldn't be pulling any tricks with a Quick Quotes Quill, Harry replied, "A few friends and I were having a pint at The Three Broomsticks and it was our intention that it would be a quiet evening."

“Do you think the two attacks were related?”

Harry replied, “I’m all but positive. I’m sure Voldemort planned both to happen at about the same time to maximize the death and destruction at Hogsmeade. He probably was disappointed that any of the Death Eaters were captured or killed.” He provided very little information that she didn’t already have, but he hardly ever gave interviews. This would be worth a half year of earnings to her.

“What about the dementors?”

“I found a way where they could possibly be destroyed. I have discussed that in some detail with the Ministry of Magic and I hope they choose to leave the wizarding world alone for a long time. I’m certain that the people in the Department of Mysteries are looking into it very closely.”

Harry let her continue for another ten minutes then stood. It was obvious that the interview was done.

She thanked him for his time. Before she left, Harry said, ‘Ms. Hamilton perhaps you could send me your final draft before it is sent in. I’d be happy to look it over.’ Again Hamilton understood that it was work direction. Coming from a man who had slain over fifty monsters the night before, she wasn’t going to go against his wishes.

As they were getting ready to leave, Minerva asked, “Harry, could you stay just another minute?”

Hamilton left and she closed the door. Handing Harry another butterbeer, she said, “I can’t thank you enough for everything that you’ve done, both today and... well... I owe you a life debt, Harry. I will never forget it. Thank you.”

Harry, looked at her and said, “Let’s not keep score Professor. I could never repay you for all the things that you helped me with.

She looked at him sadly and said, “Harry, thank you. I do want to say that I’m sorry that I ever doubted you over the philosopher’s stone and that I scolded you over rescuing Ginny in your second year, and

especially for not believing you about Draco and Severus. I was wrong.” Those conversations had weighed heavily on her mind lately and she wanted to apologize in person while she had the chance.

Harry smiled, and she saw that his gaze would be a match for Albus’ someday. He said, “There’s nothing to apologize over, Professor. You’ve been right most of the time. Let’s move on.”

Grateful that he was so gracious to her she asked, “Harry, what are you planning on studying this term?”

Harry had been expecting this and replied, “Transfiguration, if you’re teaching it, and charms. I’ll also be receiving private instruction from Alastor on fighting techniques and Bill Weasley on finance. If it is possible, I would like to continue with the D.A. group two evenings a week. I was also wondering if there were any extra visitor rooms available that Hermione and I might be able to use.” At her raised eyebrow, he hastily added, “she’s working very hard on this and will be working with books that wouldn’t be appropriate for the Gryffindor common room. And I will be bringing some weapons into the school, and it might be best...”

She replied, realizing that there was nothing improper in his request, “I understand. The visitor suites should suit your needs well. There are two bedrooms a bathroom and a large sitting area..” He could have asked her for the headmaster’s quarters with live-in maid service and she would have given it to him. “I can reserve the spare corridor on the third floor where Hagrid kept that horrible dog.”

Harry recalled that the area was quite large and would work well. It was also easy to lock to keep curious students away. He replied, “That would be perfect, Professor. Thank you very much.”

McGonagall asked, “What else can I do to help you?”

“Professor, I know you’re doing everything that you can to make the castle safe and take care of the kids. I’m fine right now. Please let me know anything else that I can do to help you. Thanks for lunch.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Potter. Enjoy the rest of your day.” She looked at him for a moment and knew that he was trying to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders. He would receive no homework from his classes. She wished the times were different and she could watch the young man take pleasure in playing school Quidditch and chatting up girls. Alas.

Harry replied, “You too, Professor.” He closed the door behind him.

... --- ...

As Harry was being interviewed by Hamilton, Minister of Magic Abraxan was interviewing Senior Auror Shacklebolt regarding the position of MLE Director.

Kingsley was having one of the hardest conversations that he’d ever had. “I truly appreciate your offer Minister, and believe me, being Director of the organization is one of my life goals.”

Natasha had expected the extraordinarily honorable wizard to turn her offer down, but felt the need to ask him. She let him off easily. “But...”

Shacklebolt took a breath and began the carefully worded reply that would detour his career. “I’m very engaged in my current assignment right now, and I believe that the wizarding world has an obligation to help the PM.”

Abraxan smiled sadly, knowing what that statement had personally cost the capable Auror. She also knew that he’d given her the stated reason. The unstated reason was that his current assignment allowed him the flexibility to remain active in Potter’s not so secret militia.

She replied, “I understand what you’re saying. I give you my word that should the position become available again, you will be the first person that I think of.” She hoped that it would be several years rather than several days before she had to make good on that promise. “Other than yourself, who would you recommend?”

“John Thomas.”

“Excuse me?”

“Ma’am?”

“I don’t know a John Thomas.”

“I forgot your background as High Priestess. I’m sorry. I’m recommending Lieutenant Colonel John Thomas. He is an SAS training officer, an OF4, our equivalent of a Senior Auror.” Seeing Abraxan’s puzzled look he added, “He’s a wizard on loan from Brisbane. His original assignment was to evaluate dark wizard infiltration in Her Majesty’s Royal forces. I helped the PM get him on a three year loan, so he would be available for about two years.”

Abraxan nodded. Kingsley said, “I’ll send you his jacket.”

Abraxan started the other conversation that she wanted to have with the interesting Auror. “I heard you and a few friends were out having a pint last evening with Harry Potter. He told me that he thought the remaining dementors had gone back to Azkaban. Do you believe that?”

Kingsley adjusted his ear stud and replied, “I’ve seen it. He told them to go back to Azkaban and they left. That doesn’t mean that things are back to normal. I doubt that the wizarding population would ever accept their return into Her Majesty’s service. At the same time, I don’t think this is the time to do anything about it. It may be many years before they’re hungry again. They can be dealt with after the war.”

“And Potter’s militia?”

Kingsley replied, “Which one? He’s a natural leader. His skill is getting ordinary witches and wizards to believe in themselves. He taught an entire generation of students how to defend themselves. He’s also as firmly planted on the light side as anyone that I’ve known including Dumbledore.”

The High Priestess had to agree with his observation. She replied, "I see. If Colonel Thomas passes muster what would you recommend that he do first?"

"Develop a small strike team within the Aurors that can go out and snatch Death Eaters where they live."

"Then?"

"We need to have some sort of defense plan in place in the event that Voldemort unleashes infiri on Britain. I don't know much about them myself. Perhaps the librarian at the castle can help provide some information that would be useful in developing a plan."

"Then?"

"It appears that Voldemort has his back against the wall financially. It may be possible to get a close estimate of how much they made off with from Folgard's last night. The ministry can't do much in that matter."

"Potter seems to have developed an extraordinarily close relationship with the goblin community. Perhaps he could tell the goblins to take action."

"Minister, I would rephrase what you said like this. The goblins seem to have developed an extraordinary relationship with one wizard, Mr. Potter. He could express an opinion with their leader Ragnok. He can't tell them anything."

She stood and ended their meeting saying, "Thank you for your candidness, Senior Auror Shacklebolt. I receive far too little of that in my position, but have been very fortunate twice today. Should you find yourself having another pint with Mr. Potter in the near future, you might ask him to continue helping the students."

"Very good Minister. I doubt that Colonel Thomas would have any interest in learning about militias."

She understood his unspoken request and replied, "I'm certain that you're correct. Thank you for your time and I will contact you again."

... --- ...

Harry's next stop was one that he was dreading. After leaving the Ministry, he apparated to the outskirts of the Burrow and walked through the garden to the house. The Burrow seemed different than any of the other times that he'd been there. No one was in the back garden. As he got to the house, Molly opened the door. She'd obviously been crying for many hours, but her face lit up when she saw him. She gave him one of her trademark hugs and showed him in. "Hello Harry. It's so good to see you. You must be starved. Let me get you something to eat."

He wasn't hungry, but if his eating something made her feel better, he would. As she was cutting him a sandwich and a piece of pie to go with his pumpkin juice she asked, "How was your day?" Her tone was casual, but inside she was terrified of the answer.

"I met with Minister Abraxan this morning. I asked her about Ron." He explained the conversation and the mandatory sentencing options. He also explained the likelihood that the dementors would eventually return to Azkaban if they hadn't already.

Not knowing if she was ready to face his words she asked, "What are you suggesting?"

Harry said, "I can't express how difficult this is to say, but I think it would be in Ron's best interest to have his wand snapped, his memory of being a wizard obliterated and allowed to live a free life as a muggle in Melbourne."

Molly was silent and Harry nervously filled the void. "Mrs. Weasley, I don't want Ron to spend one day in Azkaban. It practically killed Sirius, and most people go crazy within a year or two. She agreed to allow a family visit before the hearing, and was going to talk with Mr. Weasley this afternoon. I don't know what else to say, except I'm so very sorry."

"It's not your fault, dear. Last night wasn't your fault. You can't save everyone. No one can."

She smiled at him and he reached over and hugged her. Harry said, "I need to go now. Will you be all right?"

She replied, "I'll be fine dear. Arthur will be home in a few minutes. Thank you for stopping."

... --- ...

Harry returned home shortly before dinnertime. As soon as he walked in the door, Hermione jumped up and pulled him into a hug. Harry was momentarily surprised. Hermione had been somewhat clingy the past few days. He decided that it wasn't really that surprising – she had lost two of her three best friends so it was natural that she was feeling anxious about her remaining one. To tell the truth, he was finding it comforting himself. As she looked up at him he saw the expected question in her eyes and nodded. As he was about to tell her about his conversations Emma walked in. Smiling at seeing her daughter in Harry's arms, she said, "Harry, there's a call for you. It's your aunt Petunia."

... --- ...

Chapter 14

"The wrong side? ... Was anybody hurt? ... That's good ... You're welcome. I'll try... Bye." Harry hung up the telephone as the Grangers looked on expectantly.

Emma broke the silence. "How are they getting along, Harry?"

Harry looked at the three of them for a moment and wished that they had been his family as he had been growing up. He replied, "Fine. Uncle Vernon got a good position at a drill making firm in Richmond, Indiana. Dudley will start his last year at the local school in about a month. He got in a small auto accident. Petunia is doing some volunteer work with the church that they joined, and they like the house. It has a large back garden, and they're safe, so they'll be OK."

A tiny piece of Emma had originally wished that Harry had made similar arrangements for her and Dan, but her rational half was very grateful that they were where they were. She was glad to be helping as they could, but wished that she could be doing more.

... --- ...

As Harry was talking with Petunia, Abraxan and newly appointed MLE director John Thomas made a brief visit to Azkaban Island accompanied by half of the Aurors and Unspeakables. As Harry had told her, the dementors had returned to the island. She directed the Unspeakables to ward the island to notify them if anyone including the dementors came to or left the island.

Not knowing if they understood her or not, she told them that they were to remain on the island and that they would be hunted down if they went anywhere else. She chose her words carefully. The 132 remaining dementors lined up a respectful distance away from her so they could be counted, then floated back into the ancient fortress.

The decomposing bodies of the death eaters who had died in the different battles remained visible. Counting her blessings, they got back on the ferryboat and left.

The wizarding world needed some good news and she seemingly had some to give. She would have to decide when to release it and instructed the Aurors not to mention where they had been.

On the way back Abraxan told Thomas, "I have a very sensitive task for you to do Saturday."

... --- ...

Alyx and the other three Auror cadets were given the rest of the week off so that the program could be regrouped after the recent deaths of the instructors. Hermione and her parents invited her to stay at Harry's home for the rest of the summer. Her rented room had been destroyed in the Hogsmede raid.

She was hesitant, not wanting to intrude, and not certain if Mr. Potter would extend the same welcome. Dan assured her that the offer was sincere.

... --- ...

Saturday morning, Kingsley knocked on the door and was shown in by Dobby. Harry had just gotten dressed and was plodding into the kitchen for a cup of coffee when he saw the large Auror. Kingsley was polite but oddly formal when he spoke, "I've been asked to escort you to the Minister's office Harry. Please finish getting dressed. We need to leave in ten minutes."

"OK. What's up?"

Shacklebolt was very noncommittal in his response. "She didn't say."

... --- ...

While Kingsley was busy collecting Harry, Thomas was in the holding cells talking with Ron. Abraxan had prefaced her request with the acknowledgement that while a million things could go wrong, and they would do best to keep it quiet, it felt like the right thing to do.

Thomas found Ron sitting at the side of his bunk in the holding cell. He held out two locking bracelets, looked at the lanky teen for a moment and said, "This is an anti-apparation bracelet. The other one will stun you if I activate it. Put them on, one on each wrist. The Minister is giving you a two-hour pass and suggested that you and your friend Mr. Potter might wish to visit your sister's grave and perhaps visit the castle for a short session on your broomsticks."

Ron initially had a confused look on his face. He had expected to be called on like this and to be led through the veil. He looked back at Thomas and said, "What?"

Thomas repeated his offer, "Would you like to go out for the morning with your friend?"

Ron could barely believe his ears. He looked at the thin squared away man with the military style hair and said, "Yes sir!"

"Here's some suitable clothing. I will only tell you once. Should you make any attempt to escape, it will be the last thing that you do. Are we clear on this point?"

"Yes sir."

"You have fifteen minutes to get cleaned up and dressed. If you're late, it's on your time."

Ron was led out of the cell and into the bathroom. There was a towel, plastic razor, soap, shampoo and deodorant on the sink. He very quickly showered and the rest and put the clothing on. Thomas was waiting outside.

When they got to the Ministry Kingsley said, "Before we take you to Ron, there's something else you can do for him. Minister Abraxan said she mentioned this the other day." Harry recalled his conversation with the minister and nodded. "I'm taking you to see our memory modification group. They'll explain when you get there."

Kingsley made the introductions. "Mr. Potter this is Professor Steve Light. Please have a seat."

Steve explained, "Mr. Potter, the process of memory modification can be tricky. It's relatively easy to Oblivate specific memories, but in these cases we're removing major portions of the subjects' experiences. The hardest part is adding new memories, and it's most difficult of all for purebloods who have almost no muggle knowledge. It's much easier if we have muggle memories to work with, especially from someone of similar age. That's where you come in. Take this pensive and put as many memories of living as a muggle in it as you can. Remember, there can't be any magic in any of them."

Harry swallowed nervously. He did not enjoy reliving his time with the Dursleys, but this was a way he could help out Ron. Ron had been enormously helpful to him in his adjustment to the wizarding world and now he could return the favor. He took the pensive and went into the other room. A few minutes later he was finished and Kingsley took him back to the lobby.

... --- ...

Ron saw Harry waiting in the lobby. He was holding three Nimbus 2000 brooms that Kingsley had lent him. They were the standard issue Auror model. Harry was racking his brain trying to find something to say that wouldn't sound stupid, morose, or sickly sweet, and Ron knew that Harry was no wordsmith.

As they broke from a brief 'manly hug' Ron spoke first. "Harry, don't apologize and don't be too upset. Let me be Gryffindor. I screwed up and I accept the consequences. Let's go have a good morning together."

They took the portkey to the cemetery outside of Ottery St. Catchpole. They were the only people there. The two of them walked to the fresh graves with Thomas a respectful distance behind. The first one read Percy Ingatious Weasley 1976 – 1997 - Beloved son - A man of principle. Ron said, "Stupid git. A man of principle. He was too pig headed to ever admit that he was wrong." Harry didn't say anything. He was staring at the other marker. It read Ginevra Molly Weasley 1981 – 1997 - Beloved daughter – Spirited friend.

Ron asked, "Were you at the service?"

Harry shook his head and said, "Hospital wing."

Thomas conjured a handful of long stemmed fresh roses and handed them to the teens. Harry kneeled down and gently laid his in front of Ginny's stone. Ron set some in front of Percy's and waited until Harry got back up and did the same to Ginny's. He glanced over and noticed that there was vacant space next to her grave. He looked nervously at Harry and asked, "Harry, do you think mum'll..."

Harry realized his friend's misunderstanding of his anticipated sentence and said, "No Ron. I think they'll just snap your wand and do some sort of memory modification. I think you'll be living free as a muggle in Melbourne."

Ron was silent for a minute then said, "I suppose that beats spending twenty years in Azkaban." Harry was surprised that Ron would compare the two so closely. Then Ron asked, "How's Hermione?"

Harry replied, "She's OK. They're still living at..."

Ron nodded his head and said, "That's good."

They stood there in silence for a minute then Ron said, "Make sure she stays all right Harry. Do what you can, will you?"

Harry nodded at his friend and said, "I promise."

Ron turned back to the graves and gave them a last look and said, "Let's go flying."

... --- ...

Minerva looked out her window, saw the activity on the Quidditch pitch and went out to investigate. Arabella, Vector and Hooch joined her. Half way out they saw who was there and hurried their pace.

In her strict Professor voice she greeted them. "Good morning Mr. Weasley and Mr. Potter. Perhaps you can explain..."

Thomas walked up and said, "Good morning Professor. He handed her the note from Minister Abraxan. She quickly read it, thought for a moment and said, "Staff, it appears that these three have invited us to a short pickup game of Quidditch."

McGonagall quickly summoned three brooms out of the storage shed and the magical megaphone. "Arabella would you care to be the announcer?"

They quickly got ready for the pickup game and Arabella got a life wish by being the announcer of a Quidditch game.

They just played the quaffle as they weren't playing with pads or gloves. The staff had the quaffle first. Minerva passed to Hooch who gracefully dodged past Thomas and threw the quaffle at the right hoop. She was a graceful flyer. Ron caught it easily and tossed the quaffle to Thomas. John flew up about half way until he was blocked by McGonagall. He tossed the ball to Harry who tried to catch it. The quaffle was intercepted by Hooch. She quickly flew past Thomas and just managed to throw it before Harry caught up with her.

Ron made another very good save and tossed the ball to Harry.

As Arabella was announcing the game using the magical megaphone, Hagrid and Poppy heard the sound and immediately walked to the Quidditch field to see what was going on. They sat by Figg in the stands watching the game. Like everyone in the Order, they knew of Ron's pending hearing and were surprised to see him there. The sight of the uniformed Auror and the prisoner bracelets on Ron's wrists clarified the situation for the gentle man who recognized the anti-apparation bracelet from his own time in Azkaban. Hagrid looked down to the other end of the field as Harry launched a shot that went past Vector. He waved to Ron who gave a brief wave back.

Too soon the hour was up and Figg called time. They landed and Harry walked to one end of the field with Thomas as Ron went to say his goodbyes to the Professors.

Professor Vector and Arabella stood to the side as McGonagall, Hooch and Hagrid went down to see Ron. Hagrid wasn't a man of many elegant words, but threw Ron into one of his massive hugs.

After a moment Ron shook himself loose and Madam Hooch said, "I'm sorry Mr. Weasley..."

Ron cut her off saying, "Madam Hooch, I screwed up badly and a Gryffindor admits his mistakes and faces his destiny. Thank you for the flying lessons and refereeing all of the games. I appreciate the time that you took with me over the years. Besides, we won our last game."

Tears had welled in her eyes; she nodded and took a few steps back.

Ron held out his hand to McGonagall, looked at her a moment and said, "Thank you Professor, both for the good game and everything."

Minerva reached up and gave the lanky teen a hug and said, "I'm proud to know you as a student and as a friend, Ron. I'll never forget you." Like the others, her eyes dazzled with unshed tears.

Ron nodded. He had a huge lump in his throat. He managed to say, "Take good care of the school, Professor." He looked at the Master Healer and said, "Take good care of Harry for me. He'll need your help."

He turned to look at Director Thomas who nodded. As Ron started to walk towards the Auror and Harry, he turned one last time to the Professors and said, "Bye."

Thomas took out a length of string and handed one end to Ron. He took the other end and tapped the middle with his wand. Harry was sobbing as he watched his best friend vanish.

... --- ...

Ah hour later Harry opened the back door and was greeted with the usual hug around the waist by Dobby. After numerous greetings from the little elf, Harry saw Hermione and the others waiting off to the side.

Hermione saw that he'd been crying and asked, "What did you have to do?"

Harry said, "Minister Abraxan gave him a pass for the morning. The new MLE Director took us to see Ginny and Percy's graves for a visit. He still had some time left so he took us to the castle and we went flying for a bit. The school staff that was there challenged us to a pickup match and we played Quidditch for an hour.

"What a foolish way to spend..." As soon as she said them, Hermione regretted her words.

"Don't say it dear," said Dan cutting his daughter off. Instead he asked, "Did you win?"

"70 to nil," said Harry realizing that Dan understood how much the game must have meant to the two friends.

"That's good," said Dan. "Let's go out and get something to eat. My treat." The six of them squeezed into Dan's car and they went to Harrods because they wanted to do a bit of shopping too. They had scotch eggs and pub pies.

As lunch was winding down, Alyx asked, "What's he like?"

Harry asked, "Who?"

"John Thomas. I've never seen him"

Emma sniggered and muttered, "I hope his middle name isn't Willie. Sorry dears." She bit her lip. "So who is he?"

Harry said, "Minister Abraxan appointed him as the Director of the Magical Law Enforcement group. He was with the SAS and said that he was on loan from Brisbane."

Dan asked, "Is he a wizard? Why would he be working with the Queen's military?"

Harry replied, "He's a wizard. I don't know what he was doing in the army. Maybe checking to see if any dark wizards had snuck in."

After lunch Harry went into one of the departments to shop and met back with everyone a few minutes later.

When they got back, Harry's phoenix Brigid was waiting at her perch with a message for them. Hermione opened it and looked at Harry who was stroking the magnificent bird. Harry asked, "What's up?"

She said, "It's from Mr. Weasley inviting my parents and us over for lunch tomorrow. Ron will be there. Did you know about this?"

Harry nodded and said, "I helped arrange it."

... --- ...

While Harry had been flying with Ron, Remus was helping Tonks sort through her parents' things at their home. They made three piles – things to banish, things for charity and a few keepsakes that Tonks needed to keep. Remus was a big help as he listened to the stories behind some of the items.

As they were sorting through her parent's things, Tonks said, "I was a crappy daughter."

As he had lost his parents when he was about five years younger than Tonks, Remus hadn't had any experience of relating to his parents on an adult-adult level. He gently asked, "Why would you say that?"

She looked into his grey eyes and replied, "I didn't spend much time with them in the last few years."

"Perhaps not, but they were proud that you were making your own life. I had a chance to talk with them at the wedding."

"I always thought I'd have years to visit with them and bring grandchildren over to..."

He could see the tears welled in her eyes and dabbed them away with his handkerchief. A moment later her replied, "I don't think I can father children, Dora... Not that you asked me to."

She gave her lover an exasperated look and replied, "Remus, almost any man can get a woman pregnant. It takes a special man to be a father. We'll work it out. This is a pretty nice home. Would you like for us to live here?"

"It does have more room than my cottage in Sherwood or your flat in Piccadilly. I'd be happy anywhere if I can be with you."

She smiled at his reply, toyed with the buttons on his shirt and said, "Remus, make an honest woman out of me. Let's get married."

Her words were the sweetest sound he'd ever heard. How could he have been in Gryffindor if he didn't even have the courage to ask the woman that he loved to marry him? He replied, "Oh gods, yes. Yes. Thank you. I'll be a good husband and if we can find a way, I'll be a good father. I promise you with all my heart. I love you so much, I don't know what to say."

Tonks' hair had gone electric blue. Racing to get him unbuttoned she said, "Get out of those and show me what that monster can do."

... --- ...

Sunday morning looked to be another bright sunny day. Harry got up early and looked at the papers. Reading the Daily Prophet, one would get the impression that lawn bowling and the summer league Quidditch matches were the only newsworthy events. There was only a small article about the new MLE Director, Thomas. It was as if the entire staff of the paper had been subjected to an over-strong cheering charm.

The Quibbler reported that the dementors had been sighted and counted in Azkaban. There was another article about the rebuilding in Hogsmeade. Neither paper brought up anything about Ron's outing.

Soon Harry was joined by Susan and the Grangers. "Morning Harry," said Susan.

"Hi Susan," said Harry, putting the papers down.

"Still famous?" She asked with a smirk on her face.

"Not today. Not a mention," Harry replied smiling back at her.

"Do you mind?" she asked, a lot more seriously.

Harry thought for a moment and said, "I don't really care as long as it's mostly the truth. Everyone colors a story somewhat, but I don't like outright lies."

Susan nodded and replied, "Auntie used to say about the same thing."

"Where's Alyx?" asked Hermione.

"She went to visit some friends in Brighton," replied Susan.

"What are your plans for the day?" asked Emma.

Susan replied, "I'm going to visit Hanna."

Harry nodded and said, "I went and visited Ginny and Percy's graves yesterday. I felt..."

"Less hurt?" asked Emma.

Harry nodded. Hermione added, "I miss her too." She looked into his eyes for a moment and nodded.

"The Weasleys invited us over," said Hermione.

Dan shook his head a fraction of an inch and Emma said, "I think Dan and I will stay here. You two should go."

"What time?" asked Harry.

"They said to come about ten."

... --- ...

They arrived at the Weasley's and it was as Harry remembered it. Ron was trying out Fred and George's latest jokes. Bill and Fleur were talking to Arthur while Charlie was talking to Mrs. Weasley. Fleur was pregnant.

"Hey mate," said Ron as they walked over. "I was telling Fred and George that you made a decent chaser."

"So did McGonagall. I was impressed," replied Harry, noticing that Hermione was hanging back a bit. He went over to see Bill and Fleur, leaving Ron to talk with Hermione.

"Hello Harry," said Bill. "We want to thank you for the help that you were able to get for Ron. The law really stinks, but it was put in place to prevent all of the Death Eaters from worming out of any punishments after paying Fudge off. For us it was a double-edged sword. Griphook came by and talked with me yesterday."

Harry shook his head slightly, but Bill continued anyway. "Harry set up a huge fund for Ron to meet his living expenses for years and get him set up in a business of his own if he wants to after he graduates."

"Thank you Harry," said Arthur. He'd been worried that Ron wouldn't have the funds to support himself.

"Please don't mention it Mr. Weasley. I just wanted to help." He handed them all matching wrist watches and said, "I got these for all of us. Ron's has the same face as ours. Whenever we look at it, we'll know that even though he's far away, he's seeing the same thing."

"Thanks Harry," said Charlie. "It's brilliant."

After they were done, Arthur pulled Harry aside and said, "Molly wanted to have a few words with you and Hermione. I'll go get her."

“OK,” replied Harry. “I’ll be there in a few minutes.” He could talk with Mrs. Weasley anytime, but knew that the clock to see Ron was rapidly ticking.

... --- ...

While Ron was spending some time with his brothers and Harry a man knocked on the front door.

Molly answered the door and showed him in.

A friendly looking wizard was at the door. He greeted her saying, “Good afternoon. My name is Chet Winthrop from the Australian Ministry in Victoria. I will be Ron’s Observer in the Melbourne Amnesia Recovery Center for a month.”

Molly led him to the kitchen table along with Arthur. Hermione started to leave, but Molly asked her to stay. She poured him some tea and he began with his presentation.

Taking the cup he began, “Thank you. As I said, Ron will start his new life in Australia living in Melbourne, Victoria. It will begin with a crash course in muggle living under the guise of a memory therapy program followed by a few months stay at a halfway house until start of school term in January. His memory will be checked several times during that period to be certain that the obliviation and memory modifications were successful. Mr. Potter has generously provided Ron with sufficient funding to start a small business after he graduates and meet his living expenses for many years to come. Barclays has an account manager that will meet with Ron from time to time.” Molly wasn’t aware of this and just nodded. Harry was such a good friend to her family.

Winthrop continued. “He will be attending Scotch College in Victoria and enrolled as a year twelve student. It is a small private boarding school with about 250 men and women in his year. The year should help him attain the skills that he will need to successfully live in the nonmagical world. The students all take the VCE exams and the pass rate has been 100 percent for many years.”

Arthur asked, "What courses will he study? Surely he won't be taking potions?" Hermione gave him an exasperated look.

Winthrop replied, "He will take computer training, chemistry, literature, environmental science, accounting, and physical education. He will have the opportunity to play on any of the sport teams to the degree that he wishes. Meals and laundry service will be provided. There is also a home economics class during the final semester that covers how to live in a flat, manage a checkbook, shopping and day to day activities. Should he have the desire to, he would be prepared to attend post secondary school at a university."

Seeing Hermione nod he continued. "Some of the subjects aren't all that different from potions and herbology. Computer training and literature will help him be a well-rounded person. The accounting course has two units – The first is accounting and financial management of a small business. The second is operation of a small business. Both should be useful for him in the future."

Seeing Molly's concerned look he concluded saying, "The wizarding world isn't just chucking him over the side Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. In my observation, Ron is being given every possible opportunity to live a happy productive life. I'll send you periodic reports on his progress."

"What will he need to bring?" asked Molly? "We don't know too much about muggle artifacts." Arthur gave her a wounded look, but in truth, his fascination with batteries and plugs wouldn't do much to help his son.

"He'll need a trunk, clothing, pens, notebooks, a calculator, and personal items. A laptop computer is optional."

"My parents and I can get those," said Hermione. When will..." She couldn't say it.

Winthrop replied, "Assuming that Minister Abraxan doesn't change her sentencing recommendation on Monday, Ron will spend Tuesday and Wednesday at St. Mungo's and will take the noon flight from Heathrow to Sydney and another flight from Sydney to Melbourne. He will be granted Australian citizenship on his 18th birthday. Here are

the specifications for his school trunk. You will need to deliver it to me at the Ministry sometime on Tuesday. It will be inspected for any trace magic or contraband and he will take it with him on the flight.”

Winthrop continued. “While he is at the Amnesia Center, I will purchase his school uniforms and anything else that he needs. He will believe himself to be a rather wealthy orphan.”

Molly gave Harry a strange look and asked, “When will he be allowed to come home?”

This was the question that Winthrop always dreaded answering. “Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Ron won’t be allowed to return to Britain. Britain has had a policy of deporting her convicts for hundreds of years. Your Ministry never removed it as an option. In this case, Ron has a very wealthy and influential friend. Most convicts are simply obliterated and deported penniless. Most commit suicide with a year. Mr. Potter convinced the Minister to take extraordinary measures to ensure Ron’s long-term success.”

Molly stood and said, “Thank you for coming over Mr. Winthrop. I think we’ll spend some time with our son now.”

... --- ...

Molly sat through the hearing in silence. The hypocrisy of the hearing hit her like a freight train. Killers had been routinely sent to Azkaban in this very courtroom. This courtroom that had been used to judge ruthless killers, Harry Potter and now her son. She admitted that he’d killed a person, but he represented no future threat to wizarding society.

Next to her, Arthur sat silently carrying the tremendous weight of guilt. At Dumbledore’s urging he had tacked two sentences at the end of his muggle protection act that had passed several years ago. ‘In the case of capital crimes, the Minister of Magic is specifically prohibited from recommending a sentence below that which is proscribed by the law. The removal of this clause shall not affect cases that have already been charged.’ It was an airtight amendment.

His mind replayed his conversation with Hammer regarding hiring additional security. It was a mistake that had ended her life and shattered his own.

He was broken from his reverie by Abraxan's words. "You have been charged and admitted guilt of the charge of reckless use of magic resulting in the death of Director of Magical Law Enforcement, Connie Doreen Hammer. Before I pass sentence, do you have any words that you would like to say? She nodded and the magical chains that had bound him to the chair unraveled themselves and fell to the floor allowing the teen to stand.

Ron rose from the chair, faced her and said, "I admit that the Reducto charm that came from my wand hit Director Hammer. I cannot take it back, and for that I am truly sorry. I apologize to you Minister and to the Wizengamot. I accept whatever judgment that you see fit to pass, for I am Gryffindor and I am Weasley."

"I wish to express my love to my parents and my brothers and sister. I wish to tell the wizarding world that I am proud to be Harry Potter's friend. Harry, Mione, I'll miss you."

...---...

Two hours later it was quiet in the room at St. Mungo's. Thomas had snapped Ron's wand and he'd been taken to the wizarding hospital. Molly had never been so proud of any of her children in her life as when Ron said his words to Abraxan.

Professor Steve Light led the young man to one of the hospital beds and gave him a small glass of potion to drink. The last words that he said before going to sleep were, "The Cannons look good this year." Light smiled in agreement and carefully began his work. Winthrop and Thomas sat in the observation room as Light carefully obliterated the wizarding being out of Ron. Following his checklist, he was very methodical in his work.

Three hours later he began adding the long silver threads from the two pensives that were at his side.

... --- ...

Two hundred miles to the southwest, Molly and Arthur were having dinner alone. Fleur, Bill, Charlie and the twins had each offered to stay with them as had Poppy and several members of the Order.

Molly had politely sent them away. She had made a simple meal of bread and stew for her husband and companion of nearly 28 years. Neither of them were large consumers of alcohol, although tonight there was a partially full bottle of Ogden's at their table. It was what was left from their family toast from the day before. Arthur had originally bought several cases for the wedding, which seemed a lifetime ago.

As he was pouring them each a small glass, Molly heard a snap and a flutter as she watched Ron's hand fall from the Weasley family clock. She bent down and carefully picked it up. She looked at it for a minute before sliding open the lid of the small polished box containing several dozen hands that had fallen from the ancient clock over many years. Without saying a word, she carefully put the box back in the china cabinet. She went to her husband's waiting arms and sobbed.

... --- ...

Please Review.

Chapter 15

Riddle was frustrated. With the death of Bella and the capture of Wormtail, he had lost the closest followers that could be considered confidants. It was for that reason that Snape was summoned on Sunday evening.

“Sit down Severus,” commanded Riddle. Snape knelt and did as he was told, not having any idea what the Dark Lord would want. Riddle continued, “What is your assessment of the raid on Hogsmeade?”

Snape carefully replied, “If your primary objective was to acquire gold for operating funding than I would say that it was largely met. If your goal was the annihilation of the village than it was unfortunate that Potter and his little friends were there.”

“It wasn’t his little friends that killed or captured eight of my Death Eaters. It appears that Potter has joined or is leading Dumbledore’s old Order. Dolohov recognized Moody, several of the Aurors and Potter’s old professor, Lupin. At least a third of the dementors were destroyed. He has found a way to easily kill them. The lunatic’s paper ran a story which sounded like their side achieved a victory.”

“No one pays attention to the writings of a fool. They also ran a story about apparating to the moon.”

“Perhaps, but I shall raise another army and go after the castle. Potter’s story certainly steeled dozens of wavering parents to send their children to Hogwarts, strengthening the Ministry’s position.” Snape said nothing, waiting for the Dark Lord to finish or ask a question.

“By late October we shall be ready. Who within the school is loyal to us?”

Between the arrests and expulsions Snape doubted that anyone was, but wanted to survive the meeting without being tortured. He wisely replied, “I shall find you an answer. When shall we meet again?”

“Late in August. See who you can recruit. I need at least another dozen followers recruited and trained by the end of September. Go to Durmstrang if you need to. They can easily be purchased. When I am ready, I shall summon the Inferi to join us.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Leave now.” Snape got up to leave, amazed that he hadn’t been tortured. He was astounded that the Dark Lord would consider that Potter might be leading the Order. He might be looked up to by a few of the fame hungry students, but he had no real skills, just luck. Arrogant, just like his father. Yet it was troubling that it had been reported that he’d destroyed dozens of the dementors, though Snape himself hadn’t personally witnessed it. The Chosen One. Nothing more than a load of made up rubbish. More troubling to him was the identity of the wizard who had murdered Bellatrix. None of the Death Eaters had been close enough to witness it and neither paper indicated that someone had come forth and taken credit.

He set off for Durmstrang to recruit twenty followers.

... --- ...

Harry had not left his room in two days. He was racked with guilt and felt crushed by the pressure. He had done everything that he could think of to help his friend. ‘Dumbledore would have done better... He’d have...But Dumbledore had watched helpless as Barty Crouch had thrown Sirius into Azkaban... Helpless or allowed it to happen?’ he would never know for sure. Both men were dead.

He heard a soft knock on his door. Dan opened it and said, “Get cleaned up and dressed. We have a match in an hour.” Without waiting to hear an argument, he closed the door and walked out.

Harry had desperately wanted a father figure for years. Now he had one but it had its frustrating moments too. He dragged himself out of bed and stumbled into the shower. After five minutes of being sprayed by the hot water, he opened his eyes, realized that he’d already shampooed his hair three times, finished and got out.

There was a new Cutter and Buck golf shirt on his bed along with a pair of soft spiked golf shoes. Harry smiled for a moment as he got dressed. Dan was a really nice bloke. He didn't even notice anymore that he was wearing his dragon hide vest and trousers. They had come to fit like a second skin now.

He went downstairs. Alyx was back at Auror class. Susan, Hermione and Emma had gone shopping for something. Dan was at the table having a fourth cup of coffee and was reading the paper.

Winky had coffee, juice and toast ready for Harry as soon as he sat down. "What's in the news?" asked Harry.

"In the London Times, there are reports of disappearances and deaths. The page 3 girls in the Sun are looking younger every day. According to the Daily Prophet all is right in the world and Britain should be focusing all of her attention on the Chudley Cannons resurgence. The Quibbler seems bi-polar. Half of the articles appear to have been written by a lunatic, while the other half are spot on."

Harry grinned, and said, "The lunatic in question is my friend Luna Lovegood's father. Interestingly enough, his first name is Odd. Your assessment is correct. Luna usually sees the world from a different angle too, but she's brilliant."

Dan nodded and replied, "Yesterday it listed the deaths associated with the attack on Hogsmeade. There was a large article about Sirius Black being named innocent of all previous charges. A large fund in his name was set up to help the war victims. A man named Peter Pettigrew was charged, confessed and convicted of murder. He also confessed to an entire bevy of other crimes going back to your parents' murders. Did you know that your friend Ron and his brother gave him shelter for many years?"

Harry nodded, hoping that bit of news would have never seen the light of day, and not really wanting to tell Dan how much he knew about Pettigrew. "Percy found him in their back garden and they kept him as a pet rat for many years. I wish Hermione's cat had eaten him in third year when it tried to. Where are they anyway?"

“They had some shopping to do for something and just wanted to get out of the house. It’s good news that Black’s name was cleared. It’s something at least. We should go.”

Neither man played particularly well, but being out and visiting together seemed therapeutic for both of them. Dan’s feeling of confinement abated a bit as did Harry’s sense of guilt over not doing more for his friend.

As they were walking after their tee shots on the eighteenth, Dan said, “Harry, every man who has ever survived a war and witnessed his buddy get killed has had the same thoughts – what could I have done differently? It’s called survivor’s guilt. You didn’t write the law to take away the Minister’s authority to abate his sentence, Ron’s father did. How do you suppose he feels?”

They kept walking and Harry didn’t respond, so Dan kept going. “Your wizarding world is a wonderful and dangerous place, even if a lot of it seems old fashioned to me. Your owl post delivery was high tech 200 years ago, but the e-mail and cellular telephones available today make a joke out of them. The new Internet that the American Vice-President invented will connect the entire world. You can look yourself in the mirror and honestly say that you did everything that you could for your friend. There are other issues that need to be dealt with. I’m sorry to say, but it’s time to move on. It’s your shot.”

... --- ...

Hermione, her mum and Susan had finished their shopping the day before and had placed Ron’s clothing, laptop, personal items, his new watch as well as an envelope containing 5,000 Australian dollars in the trunk. Per the instructions, there were no photographs, notes or wizarding items of any sort. On Tuesday morning they delivered it to Winthrop’s temporary office in the Ministry building. They didn’t run into anyone else that they knew.

... --- ...

Hermione wanted to give Harry the best birthday party ever, but was so frustrated at the prospect. On one hand everyone needed

something to cheer about, on the other no one felt like celebrating. Harry had a great home to hold a party – but only a dozen or so people could see it. He needed to be with some people – but there was a risk of publicized gatherings.

Susan suggested, “One of Auntie’s old friends owns a large beach house by Brighton. I’m certain that he’d let me and a few friends use it. When’s Harry’s birthday?”

“This Thursday the 31st. Please don’t mention Harry’s name.”

“I’ll borrow it for Wednesday through Friday. That will give us time to set it up. You decide who you want to invite. It’s not as big as Harry’s but it would sleep ten. You can make a bonfire on the beach, and the water is warm. It’s a muggle area, but it is secluded enough to apparate. Or I can get some portkeys made for only a galleon each. How many would you need?”

“Maybe a dozen. Make it twenty. Then we wouldn’t have to explain where it was. Here is some gold.”

“Thanks. I’ll meet you back at the house for dinner.”

They plotted and planned like soldiers on a mission.

... --- ...

Wednesday morning, Moody dropped off a shopping bag full of shrunken books for Harry on different topics – dueling, fighting spells, shielding spells, physical fitness, small arms. He set them on one of the library tables, resized them and growled, “We start our training on Monday the 4th at 8AM at the castle. McGonagall said that she had a space reserved. I can do most of the work to get it ready, but I’ll need your help later with the conditioning equipment. You get a start on these.”

Harry tried not to count them, but there must have been about a hundred books on the table. He replied, “Thanks Moody. I’ll be ready.”

Moody glanced at the papers and shook his head in disgust. "The effen Prophet has gone over the edge. There's better content in the Sun."

"I've always found that to be the case," quipped Dan, smiling until Emma whacked him on the back of the head.

"There were a bunch of attacks on several groups of people in Leeds last night according to the Times," said Dan. "There were quite a few wounded and a half dozen killed. The Times made it sound like a terrorist attack."

... --- ...

The nurse walked into the room and looked at the patient. He had one arms in a cast and his shoulder and head were bandaged. She put the tray down and said "Good morning, Mr. Wilson. Your surgeries went fine."

"What about..."

"They died last night. I'm sorry."

He looked around the room. There were flowers in inexpensive vases and a few get well cards.

The nurse continued, "There were quite a few patients brought in last night. Some sort of bomb blast I heard. I'll come by and visit after a bit."

... --- ...

It was a few hours in the car, but it was nice to get out. They had the sunroof open and the radio on as they drove. Hermione was an unsteady but determined driver. She had passed her written test to obtain her learner permit. After an hour they stopped and Dan drove the rest of the way. Susan had good directions and the roads were well marked.

Emma relaxed somewhat with Dan back driving. Upon finding out that their talented daughter could pop around the country at will, she'd never expected that Hermione would ever want to get driving lessons. She was pleased and marveled that Hermione was so well integrated into both worlds. They could bake cookies together and she could conjure the plate to put them on out of thin air.

They arrived and went into the beautiful beach house. On the upper level were the kitchen and a very large open area with sofas, chairs and a large eating table. There was a set of floor to ceiling windows and French doors opening to a spacious wooden deck. The deck had stairs that led down directly to the beach. The lower level had five bedrooms, bathrooms and a storage area.

They went out to Harry's English Restaurant in Brighton, initially because of the novelty of the name, but were very pleasantly surprised by the food. After dinner, they went to the grocery store and purchased everything that they would need for the next day. After they put everything away, Hermione asked Harry to go for a walk with her along the beach. Susan went to meet a friend in Kempton a mile or so away.

Hermione told her mum that they'd be gone a while. Harry took his cellular telephone in case they needed to call. They walked along the pebble beach at the surf line. Occasionally they would have to run in a few paces as a larger than normal wave came in. They took off their shoes and let the water and flakes of sand flow over their feet.

They talked a little, but in truth Harry was as awash in guilt as his feet were in the surf. Hermione easily fell into her big sis role and encouraged Harry to talk by starting the conversations for him. "I miss Ginny, don't you?"

She noticed Harry smile at the remembrance. He nodded. "She was easy for me to talk with, like you, and in the last year wasn't afraid to tell me off. We kind of ended on an equal footing after the Department of Mysteries...It was ironic, one or the other of us always seemed to be pushing the other one away...The month that we did go out was..."

“Nice?”

“Yeah. Thanks for asking. It’s good to remember people.”

She gave his arm a little squeeze and replied, “It’s good to live too. I’m not sure that I ever thanked you properly for saving me...”

“Which time?” He smiled at her even though it was getting dark.

“I was just thinking that. There have been a few times, haven’t there?”

“I ‘spose. I don’t keep score that way.”

She leaned up and gave his nose a quick kiss, then gently brushed the bridge of it with her finger. She looked at him expectantly, then lowered her eyes and continued walking. After a moment, she asked, “What did Moody want?”

“He dropped off about a hundred books for me to read and talked a bit about training starting next week.”

“That’s a lot of books to really study.”

“No kidding. I know it won’t get me anywhere, but I wish the professor had done something like this a year ago. He spent a year showing me about two hours of memories. I feel so far behind.”

She had thought the same and wished that they’d kept the D.A. going. “He must have thought that they were important to have gone out and collected them. Will you show them to me sometime?”

“Sure.”

She conjured a blanket and they watched the stars in the night sky, or at least as many as they could see so close to a city. Up in the air they could see a 747 on its way to some unknown destination far away.

Seeing Harry transfixed on the jumbo jet and worried where that train of thought would lead, she asked, "Did you know about Hanna and Susan?"

"Huh?" Harry wasn't sure that he'd heard her.

"They liked each other."

"Huh?" He'd definitely heard her that time.

"Like a couple."

"But she and Ernie...Oh..."

"Does it change how you feel about her?"

"Not really. I never really thought about her like..."

Making a quick decision, Hermione said, "Scoot closer... there... Happy birthday, Harry... Close your eyes." She leaned over and gave him a quick kiss. Before he could react, she had moved a respectful distance away, blushing slightly and glancing shyly over at him.

Harry wasn't sure what to think, but it was nice. He said, "Thanks. Thank you."

Not knowing what else to say about the kiss, he returned to the previous topic. "What about Alyx?"

Encouraged that he didn't seem too uncomfortable about the kiss, and deciding to tease him a little, she replied, "What about her?"

"Is she..."

"Harry, do you want to live to be eighteen?" She regretted her words the moment they left her lips. "I meant to say... I'm sorry, Harry. I really have no idea who she likes. I suppose it's her own business. You don't like..."

“No. No, I’ve hardly even talked to her. She’s very polite, except in a fight. Maybe we should go back. It’s pretty late.”

“I’m sorry Harry.” Her chance had been ruined. She squeezed his arm again, cursing herself for saying such a horrible thing. Things had been going so well. She managed to keep the tears from her eyes as they started walking back.

“No Worries. Thanks for remembering my birthday.”

... --- ...

Harry woke up early and watched the sun slowly make its way above the sea, the colors slowly but surely changing from deep violet to pink to orange to yellow. He liked the sound of the waves rolling steadily against the little pebbles, and the gulls in the air. He found it very relaxing.

A few minutes later, Dan came out, two cups in hand. “Good morning, Harry. The sound of the ocean is nice, isn’t it?”

Harry took the offered cup and said, “Thanks. Yes it is. I’ve never had the time to just listen to it.”

“Have you spent much time by the ocean?” Somehow he knew the answer wouldn’t be very good.

“Never, well the professor took me once for a few minutes, but that was to look for something, to look for one of the horcruxes. That was the day...”

“The day he got killed?” Dan had the feeling that Harry had more to say about this than he was currently willing to let out.

“Yeah.”

“I thought he was injured or ill. How did you both get back?”

“I apparated us.”

"I didn't know that you could take someone along with you. Can Hermione?" That sort of ability amazed him.

"I don't know if she's ever tried."

Dan saw the opportunity to get Harry to open up a bit more and asked, "Why do you think he shielded you that day?"

Harry seemed ready to answer and said, "I've thought a lot about that. Either to protect me one last time or to give Malfoy or Snape one last try to redeem themselves. I think he was surprised to see Snape come after him."

"Harry, I'm eternally grateful that you did, but why did you protect us at the wedding?" He had never seen a man risk his life to save another on a first hand basis before, let alone to save his family.

Harry simply replied, "Because it was the right thing to do and I could. I couldn't have anything happen to any of you." There was no hint of bragging, no hint of a debt owed, just a reply.

"Why didn't everyone just apparate away?"

"Riddle's Death Eaters must have warded the grounds to prevent apparation, or maybe Mr. Weasley did, I never asked." The idea of magics and counter magics was taking a while to fully integrate into Dan's thought process.

Thinking about it a bit more, Dan asked, "Is that why you have those emergency portkey ropes placed in the pocket of the body armor?"

Harry nodded and replied, "Yes. From what I've heard you can't tell that an area is warded like that until you try to apparate. It's very difficult to quickly ward an area against portkeys."

"Harry, these Death Eaters, where do they live? It doesn't seem to be too big of a secret who they are. Why don't the Aurors just go after them?"

Harry swept his hand through his messy hair and replied, "That's the million pound question. It wouldn't be hard to impound their house like they did with Malfoy Manor."

Remembering what he'd been sent out to do, Dan replied, "We can save a few of Britain's problems for later. Let's find the girls and have breakfast."

"Happy birthday Harry," said Emma when they walked in the door. She had coffee, juice, scones, and other pastries set on the table as well as bacon and pancakes. Susan and Hermione came up the stairs a few minutes later. They each gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and greeted him.

"What are the plans for the day?" asked Dan.

"I invited people to come at ten for a day at the beach. You'll grill brats for lunch at one and steaks for dinner at seven. We're playing volleyball, wading in the surf, having beers, visiting and going out in the speedboat."

The day was fun. The girls all looked smashing in their bikinis. Lavender and Alyx, who filled out their bikini tops particularly well, were getting hungry looks from quite a few of the guys to Susan's discontent. Alyx's looked like it had been painted on. Harry couldn't keep his eyes off Hermione. Seeing her in a bikini effectively shattered any 'one-of-the-guys' image he might have still had of her, and her kiss of the night before lingered on his mind, causing him to begin to re-evaluate their relationship.

Padma and Lavender, who had become closer upon the loss of Parvati, seemed to be spending a lot of time trying to get Harry's attention and managed to bump into him several times on the volleyball court. There were plenty of young wizards, though, who were quite willing to make up for Harry's inattentiveness to the pretty pair. Justin and Dean eventually managed to get them out in the speedboat, which somehow ran out of gas while the four of them were out in it.

Alicia, who was easily the most athletic of the DA members, took pity on her quidditch teammate and helped show him how to play volleyball and also managed to keep falling witches off of his back. The long legged blonde cut a striking figure in a bikini herself, but was oblivious to the looks she received, being single-mindedly focused on winning the game. Hermione, claiming not to be inclined to sports, didn't join in the game but cheered enthusiastically on the sideline for Harry's team, distracting him quite a bit when she jumped up and down after a few exciting points.

As the afternoon wound down and Harry had visited with a surprisingly large number of people, Dan got the charcoal grill ready. With a little help from a few of the hungrier quests, the coals were ready almost instantly. Soon there were fifty steaks on the grill. Dobby and Winky were inside getting everything else ready. Fred and George were out chatting up all of the women, young or otherwise.

Effectively Hermione had invited all of the Order and most of the DA. Alyx had invited the three other Auror candidates Keith Bradley, Gunner Fawcett, and Richard Chambers. Harry remembered them from Ravenclaw. Remus suggested that it was a good opportunity to do a bit of recruiting for the Order. After consulting with Harry, he spoke with all of the sixth and seventh year DA members who weren't already part of the Order. As they were eating, Tonks and Remus asked Alyx and Harry to stand up for them at their wedding to be held on Boxing Day. Hermione and Kingsley agreed to be the attendants.

Dan took quite a few photos. They'd heard of a number of these people but had never met many of Hermione's friends from the magical world. Inside, the CD player seemed to be getting a bit louder, with a pleasant mix of U2, the Wailers, the Beatles, Dave Matthews, The Weird sisters, and the Cranberries playing in the CD player.

Too soon it got dark and people migrated to the bonfire that had been set up on the beach. Harry amazed everyone who asked when he talked about his newfound love of golf. He grew introspective and thought, 'I've lost nearly all of my Quidditch teammates, I'll be damned if I'll lose my golf partner.'

The conversation soon turned to school. To no one's surprise Minerva named Harry and Hermione head boy and girl. Seeing the look of concern on Harry's face, she said, "Don't worry, you can delegate 90 percent of the tasks to the fifth year prefects. It happens every year."

About nine Harry noticed that Molly and Arthur had arrived. "Hello Harry dear," said Molly reaching up to give him a hug.

"Thanks for coming. I was hoping you would."

"Did you have a nice day? The weather was lovely."

"Yes," admitted Harry. He suddenly felt guilty for having had a great day.

Arthur said nothing, as he'd found that anything that he'd said over the last few days had been the wrong thing. Molly seemed quite close to a breakdown with three of her children taken from her in the course of about a week. He didn't want to fan the fire.

"Sit with me," asked Harry to Arthur as Molly went to visit with Minerva. "How are..." Harry wasn't sure of the words to use, but want to give Mr. Weasley the opportunity to say what he wanted to say.

"I'm worried about Molly," admitted Arthur. "She's growing very bitter with the Ministry about things. She blames you, she blames me, she blames Dumbledore, she blames Hammer, she blames Minister Abraxan. She blames..."

"Everybody but Voldemort and his Death Eaters" said Flitwick who was sitting nearby. "You didn't invite them that night. You didn't suggest that they murder your children. You and Molly were simply trying to give Bill and Fleur a very nice wedding. I taught him charms, Albus taught him transfiguration, Minerva at one time or another had most of the Death Eaters as students. Those two young women who were raped at Folgard's were bound using a charm that I teach in class for wrapping packages."

The little professor put down his mug and stood. "We're spending our time blaming the wrong people. Wands don't kill people. People kill people. Bigotry, hatred and misguided ideals kill people. Arthur, I will always smile when I remember your daughter. Would you want me to feel any other way than to remember her vibrancy and love of people? In my eyes, she was a gift that we were given to come and know, if only for a short while. Your son should be landing about now to start a whole new life. He'll always be your son and I'll always remember him as one of the bravest young men that I've had the pleasure to call friend. You want to remember them at their best."

It turned out that Flitwick had been talking a bit louder than he'd intended to and everyone had heard him. When he finished, fifty people stood and applauded. Hagrid made a toast, "To Ron. A hellofa good man"

Everyone raised their glass.

Someone raised their glass and said, "To Harry and Ron. Two damn fine men."

"Hear, hear."

An hour later people were toasting Aberforth's extraordinary goats.

... --- ...

Abraxan reviewed the paperwork that Straighthand had started and Thomas had completed. Potter, Moody and Alyx would each receive the Order of Merlin awards, first second and third class respectively. She would schedule the award ceremony to be the first Saturday in September, the seventh, and present them at the school.

She was certain that the young man would be very pleased to receive the award. She would invite all of the off-duty Aurors to attend as well.

... --- ...

As instructed, Harry arrived at Hogwarts at eight on Monday morning. Moody met him at the door and together they walked up to the third

floor corridor that they would be using. Harry had forgotten how large it was.

“Sit down, Potter,” growled Moody. “Tell me what you know about Voldemort?”

“He was born in an orphanage. I’ve seen images of his mother...”

“Not Riddle. You probably know as much about him as any man alive. Tell me about Voldemort. How does he fight? Show me if you want to.”

“He’s very good. Actually he’s amazingly quick. He starts early in a duel. He’s got some fantastic shields. He either leads off with the Cruciatus or the killing curse, and most of the time he has other people do his dirty work for him.”

“How many times have you faced him and what were the outcomes?”

“I saw him the first time in the forbidden forest when I was in my first year. He had taken over Quirrell’s body. I fought him at the end of the year, which would have been June of 92. I beat him because he couldn’t bear touching me and he had to abandon Quirrell’s body.”

“About a year later, I met the sixteen-year-old version of him in the chamber of Secrets. He’s forgetful of old light magic. It took him a long time to remember about phoenix’s healing powers. That was when he came out of his diary that he’d made into a horcrux.”

“I dueled with him properly in the graveyard at Little Hangleton the night he got his body back. Because he’d used my blood as the blood of an enemy, he could touch me this time. Actually we dueled twice. The first time he started early. He hit me with the Cruciatus curse and tried to use the Imperius curse on me after I wouldn’t bow to him. I broke it and we dueled again. When our wands fought, they joined beams and it was a test of wills. I forced my spell back into his wand and the Priori Incantatum effect took place. His wand started spitting out the victims of his murders back as far as my parents. When I broke the spell, they protected me for a moment, and I ran back to Cedric’s body and the cup and got away. That was in June of 95.”

“In June of 96 I faced him in the lobby at the Ministry for a few minutes until the Professor found me. He tried to use the killing curse on me again, but the Professor blocked it with a bit of the fountain statue that used to be there. I watched him duel the Professor for about ten minutes before he grabbed Bellatrix and left.”

“How do you suppose that he beat your parents? They were very good.”

“Actually, I’ve seen it with all the times I’ve spent with the dementors. They split up. My Dad tried to hold him off while my Mum went to get me. She didn’t fight him. He told her to run away and leave me. She wouldn’t and he killed her. He tried to kill me a few seconds later.”

Moody was silent while Harry was speaking. The young man knew and had told him more about Voldemort’s fighting style than any man alive. Finally he asked, “Potter, what’s the usual Death Eater attack style?”

“They try to get some sort of advantage, fear, surprise, intimidation, or outnumbering the victims. They go after a family and the parents are distracted because of their desire to protect their kids. I suspect that they set up anti-apparation fields more often than not.”

Moody nodded in agreement. “Based on the murder investigations that I’ve been on, I’d say you’re right. You were a good leader splitting the Order into different workgroups. You want to give the research group something else to think about. Write down what we talked about today and give it to them to mull over. After they get the horcruxes identified and they get destroyed, we’re going to want to have a strategy already in place to flame that bastard’s ass.”

Harry smiled as Moody continued. “What we’re going to work on in the meanwhile are general fighting skills, physical conditioning, situational awareness, that sort of thing. I’ll try to give you the little things that might make you a fraction of a second quicker or an inch more accurate.”

Harry nodded and said, “Good. I didn’t get much help there last year.”

The old Master Auror nodded and said, "There are a few things about your training that we should talk about." Harry nodded prompting him to continue, "The first thing I want you to realize is that no matter how hard you work and how quickly you pick up what I'm going to show you, you won't become invincible in the next week, or month or even three months. Anybody can be beaten. Your friend's dad popped a witch who had been in over a hundred fights. She probably was focused elsewhere at the time."

Moody stood up, "OK Potter. That's enough for the day. Our schedule will be Monday through Thursday for the month of August. Bring some exercise clothing. I'll see you tomorrow at eight."

"Thanks Moody."

... --- ...

Harry arrived home a few minutes after Alyx. She had brought pizza for everyone for dinner. They all sat at the table discussing their day

"How was your day Alyx?" asked Emma.

"Good. Auror Jones was in today. She demonstrated arrest and apprehension techniques. What about you?"

"Dan and I were out in Notting Hill for lunch. Look what we found." It was the wanted poster for the Coin Collector bandits, with photos that Harry Susan and Hermione all immediately recognized as Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy. Hermione began laughing uncontrollably. Emma had recognized Snape from photos that had been published in the school newsletters to the parents.

"What's so funny?" asked Susan.

"They were robbing all of these places and only taking the coins. They left the banknotes in the cash drawer. It would be like robbing Gringotts and stealing all of the knuts."

When the laughter subsided, Alyx asked, "How was your day, Harry?"

“OK. I reviewed the different encounters that I’ve had with Voldemort looking for tendencies and potential weaknesses.”

“How many times have you faced him?” she asked, a bit awestruck.

“Seven I guess.”

“Cor Blimey! I feel like an idiot talking about learning how to apprehend shoplifters.”

“Why?” He didn’t want her to be embarrassed.

“I don’t know. It’s difficult to explain.” She wanted to be a part of something more than keeping Honeydukes inventory safe from little fingers.

Dan said, “They’re different roles, like military commandos and policework. There’s certainly some overlap, but there are major fundamental differences. No one is looking to arrest this Voldemort, am I correct?”

Alyx nodded and said, “That’s a good comparison. Fundamentally the Death Eaters aren’t criminals, they’re terrorists. We would never consider using lethal force to apprehend most criminals.”

Harry smiled sadly and replied, “Hermione and I tried stunning a dozen Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries. They kept reviving each other. It was the last time I used a stunner against a Death Eater.”

Alyx nodded and said, “I don’t have that option.”

Harry replied, “You can’t arrest the dementors or the inferi.”

Alyx thought for a moment and replied, “Harry, I see your point about dementors but I think the inferi are a myth.”

“No. I’ve see them – hundreds of them just waiting to be called.”

Hermione looked nervous and asked, "In a vision?"

"No. In a lake when the professor and I were looking for one of the Horcrux pieces."

Hermione looked frustrated and demanded, "Where? Who knows about this? Why didn't you tell any... me?"

"Dunno. Other things came up." Attempting to appease her he continued, "I'm sorry, Hermione. You're right, that's information you should have had. It was somewhere on the north coast. Professor Dumbledore double apparated me to get there." Hermione calmed down at this and gave him a grateful smile.

Alyx said thoughtfully, "Maybe we can use your pensive and find it. I have a pretty good eye for detail."

Emma asked, "Excuse me for asking, what are the inferi?"

Hermione replied, "Some sort of reanimated dead corpse like a zombie."

Emma screwed up her face and said, "Gross. Like those Night of the Living Dead movies?"

Harry replied, "Dunno. I've no idea what it takes to wake them up or what they can do. I suppose that's another task for the research committee."

Alyx asked, "On a more pleasant note, what did you think of Gunner Fawcett, Keith Bradley, and Richard Chambers? They're in my Auror cadet class. Maybe they'd make good Order members?"

Harry replied, "Keith and Gunner were in a defense club that we started two years ago. Keith was OK, but Gunner was very decent." Hermione and Susan nodded in agreement.

Alyx suggested, "Maybe the four of us could spar some evening this week? I could use some extra practice for my own lessons from Auror school. Susan probably would like it."

... --- ...

The next day Harry found out to his dismay what Moody had meant by "I'll need your help". He and Moody had to completely remake the third corridor, conjuring mats for the floor, spell absorbing covers for the walls, and objects scattered about the room that could be levitated or animated for use during a fight. He began to wish that he had paid more attention in Transfiguration class, as his conjuring skills were less than Moody expected, and Moody was not shy in letting know about it. By the end of the day he was exhausted, and staggered out to meet Hermione for the walk back to Hogsmeade. To his relief, she was sympathetic to his transfiguration shortcomings. Rather than telling him he should have studied more, she agreed to help him improve his conjuring in the evenings. Of more immediate importance, she allowed him to lean on her for part of the walk back, at which point she suddenly remembered that she had some Pepper up potion with her that he could take.

The next few weeks fell into a comfortable routine for Harry and Hermione. They would leave the house at 7:30 and apparate to the train station. They would walk to the castle and go to their respective areas, the locked corridor and the library. Harry really came to enjoy these walks with Hermione, listening to her enthusiastically describing the latest spells she had found or some information they had tracked down. For her part, Hermione was glad he was still so comfortable with her and was trying to figure out another opportunity for them to be alone together. They had lunch with whoever happened to be there that day and finish at 4:00.

During that time they had two Order meetings. The first was a rather somber situation. It seemed that the Obliviation of Ron had caused a higher degree of raw feelings than the deaths of Ginny, Ernie, Parvati or Sturgis at Hogsmeade. Hermione reviewed the final statistics and body counts from the Hogsmeade battle. She also pointed out with pride that all but one of the patients had been treated and released within 48 hours. Aberforth muttered something about effen pesky house elves in his pub and received a scathing look from Pomfrey. Several dozen people had lost their homes during the raid – Alyx had been one of them.

Harry discussed the need to bring more people into the Order.

“What skill-sets are you looking for, Harry?” asked Kingsley.

“Maybe you can help me with that,” replied Harry. “I see three likely actions ahead of us. We need people who are willing and capable of tracking down the Death Eaters one or two at a time. We need to eliminate them faster than he can recruit and train them.”

Kingsley nodded in agreement and Harry continued. “We will most likely face an attack on either the school, Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley by the Inferi. He would have a difficult time transporting them so that reduces the likelihood of them attacking in London. There might be as many as 500 or 1,000 of them. We need more research on how to defeat them. The Professor told me to attack them with fire.”

“Finally we need some people who will help in the final battle against what are left of his followers. If Riddle is systematically stripped of his Death Eaters in the next weeks we will have an easier time later on.”

Harry took a sip of his butterbeer paused for a moment to think and finished saying, “So to answer your question, if Hermione and Master Healer Pomfrey feel that they have sufficient staffing for healing responsibilities, I would say that we need people who would be suited to help fight the most.”

Harry looked around the room and saw people nodding in consensus. He glanced at Hermione and could see that she was torn. She wanted to be there in the final battle with him but feared that her fighting skills would make her a liability. Poppy replied saying, “We have enough to handle what we need to. We can always recruit students as needed.”

... --- ...

The two on two dueling training after dinner turned out to be an enlightening exercise. Neither Susan nor Hermione were especially nimble, and by unspoken agreement Harry and Alyx began developing ways to simultaneously fight and protect a partner.

Instinctively, Harry partnered with Hermione and Alyx partnered with Susan. As it turned out, Harry was quite a ways ahead of Alyx on shields and seemingly had more power in his spells. On the other hand, Alyx could cast wordlessly with nearly the equal power of her spoken spells.

Hermione had been going through the books that Moody had lent Harry at nearly twice the rate that he had. She began suggesting different shields and spells that could take down multiple opponents at once. Susan had improved her spell casting accuracy tremendously and could quickly hit a plate-sized target from 25 yards.

... --- ...

The Order meeting the last week of August had a much lighter mood. Sirius had had his name cleared. Officially Pettigrew was in Azkaban. Unofficially Molly Weasley had been given the opportunity to toss her son's pet rat Scabbers into the veil while in the unbreakable container the week before. She did so with surprisingly little remorse after hearing Pettigrew's confession that he had performed all of the reconnaissance work for the attack that had cost her three of her children.

She knew that the action would never bring her children back but it did bring her a certain measure of closure. Arthur said nothing as the small group of witnesses had silently filed out of the Death Chamber. He took no pleasure from killing.

Gunner Fawcett, Keith Bradley, Jeffrey Stebbins and Megan Jones were introduced as new members and were placed in the fighting group. Hermione's group had been unable to identify any logical items as the last Horcrux.

Kingsley reported that after conversations with MLE Director Thomas, there was no evidence of wizarding intrusion in the Royal military services.

Harry announced that the next meeting would be held Monday the eighth at Grimmauld place. Hopefully the Horcrux committee would have some new leads.

... --- ...

As the Order was meeting, Riddle had gathered his remaining Death Eaters. He had given them each a double portion of the proceeds from the raid totaling 4,000 galleons each.

McNair was startling to look at when he had his hood down. 40 percent of his skull had been replaced with the silvery substance. The Dark Lord hadn't yet grafted any skin over it, but McNair felt no pain.

Voldemort had not been as generous with Draco. Every time he stood up there was a wet spot on his robes.

When Draco asked if he could get a silver replacement, the Dark Lord shook his head and replied, "No Draco, some injuries are permanent. Such are the fortunes of war."

As they were standing in the circle, Riddle said, "It's time to summon the dementors. He cast the incantation that signaled that he wanted them to come and waited.

... --- ...

Chapter 16

Aug 31

Over an hour had passed since Tom Riddle had summoned the dementors. He had dismissed the Death Eaters a half hour ago. He would have expected them to arrive within 45 minutes, and decided that he would travel to Azkaban to see where they were.

He was slightly surprised to see the ferry unmanned, and got on the magical boat to go to the island.

The sight that greeted him enraged him as he had never been. The badly decomposed bodies of a dozen Death Eaters were laying out on the ground in a neat row. A raven was picking at Bellatrix's body. It flew off before Riddle could blast it.

In an absolute rage, Riddle made his way to the fortress a quarter mile inland. Aside from the remaining dementors, the fortress was empty. The dementors glided away from Riddle sensing that he possessed very little soul. They were at something of a standoff. Riddle knew of no way to harm the dementors and the dementors had no interest either way in Riddle.

Getting off of the ferry, Riddle apparated to Privet drive and in a fit of rage blew through the remnants of the wards that had once protected the house and in a shower of rage and spellcasting, blew number four to bits. He cast the Mark and apparated back to his headquarters to plan his next move.

... --- ...

John Thomas received notice that the wards of Azkaban had been breeched moments after Voldemort had set foot on the island. He was neither surprised to have received the message nor surprised to hear that the Dark Mark had been spotted over Harry Potter's childhood home a few minutes later.

He silently applauded Abraxan's directive that no Ministry personnel be stationed either on the island or at the ferry station until further

notice. Almost certain that it was a dark wizard who had set off the wards and unwilling to place any of the Aurors' lives at risk over a bit of meaningless real estate, he went back to his other duties.

... --- ...

Emma sat back in her chair and sipped her tea. She hoped that the fine china cup would hide her smile. She watched her daughter watch Harry. Of course he was watching Hermione just as closely. Somehow they never looked at each other at the same time.

Emma glanced at her husband. He smirked a bit and gave her a light shrug. She almost sighed out loud. She had told Dan to let it all take its own course.

Dan and Harry had been spending time on the golf course. Emma was no fool; she knew that the discussions that they've been having out on the links were about more than a silly little white ball. She knew that Dan had been gently pushing Harry into dating their daughter.

Emma had split feelings on the matter. She liked Harry. She liked him a lot. He was a kind and decent young man. He had taken them into his mansion without a moment's hesitation. He had a sense of honor that was rare in someone so young.

But he was young. So was Hermione.

She had overheard Harry's talk with Alyx about the choice between what was right and what was easy. Emma knew that he would always pick what he felt was right. This made him a great leader.

And he was a leader. Harry Potter was the commander of the light forces in a war against darkness. He was the biggest target for Lord Voldemort and his minion of Death Eaters. He was barely seventeen and he was supposed to command an army against evil itself.

Just because Lord Voldemort's end goal seemed to revolve around Harry's death didn't mean that he shouldn't date Hermione. The target on Hermione's back was almost as big.

Emma wondered if her husband would have been so encouraging if there had not been a war being waged. Emma wondered if Hermione would have actually stayed with Ron had he not made such a bad decision. Emma wondered if Hermione or Harry could get past the guilt of Ginny and actually date. Emma wondered many things. Like her daughter, she had a tendency to think too much.

Harry stood suddenly and banished the rolls of parchment that he had been trying to read, back to his desk. Everyone looked at him. He nodded to Emma and she raised her teacup slightly in a toast. Harry grinned at her as he stole from the room.

For tonight Emma decided to put the doubts out of her mind. She had a job to do. Dinner tonight was to be a conspiracy that she was a glad to be a member of. She shut her eyes for a few seconds to prepare herself. She opened them to find Dan, Hermione, Susan and Alyx looking at her.

Hermione had been attempting to read one of the hundreds of books in the Black library. Alyx and Susan had been sitting off by themselves talking softly. Emma noted that it must have been an intense discussion. There was a lot of touching going on. She and Dan had been quietly observing Harry and Hermione.

But now they all sat staring at her. She smirked at the lot of them.

“Dobby, Winky!” She called. Before she could finish the second name they both appeared.

“Hello Mrs. Dr. Herm’s Mum Granger,” Dobby greeted her. She successfully fought the urge to roll her eyes. Instead, she looked between the two elves and smiled. They were dressed in actual clothes. Dobby was wearing three of the hats Hermione had knitted. They clashed horribly with his Gryffindor red 70’s style leisure suit. Winky looked decidedly uncomfortable in her hot yellow sundress and combat boots. She wore a hat also. But only one.

“Emma, Dobby. My name is Emma. I want both of you to use it. Please,” she said in futility.

"How can we help you Mrs. Emma?" Winky asked. Well, that was a bit better.

"Harry has decided that he wants to cook dinner tonight. He has asked me to teach you two how to play some muggle games," she answered. Dobby's eyes got even bigger.

"No no no no no. Mr. Harry Potter Sir can't cook dinner! It's our jobs!" Dobby squealed. Winky looked as if she were going to cry.

"Master Potter not happy with Winkys cooking! Oh oh oh oh!" She went to bash her head on the coffee table and Emma did something very rare. She raised her voice.

"STOP!" She ordered. Emma was amused to see that both her daughter and husband jumped almost to attention.

"Harry is cooking tonight because he wants to. He wants to. It has nothing to do with your job or abilities. We all love your meals, Winky. Harry wants both of you to be able to enjoy your time off. He cares very much about your well being," she explained.

"But... It's a house elves job to cook. And clean. Winky's old masters never cooked!" Winky objected in a high squeak. She was twitching nervously.

"Harry is not like your old masters Winky. He was raised differently," Emma started to explain. She hesitated. She didn't want to tell them how differently.

Saving from having to answer, Hermione said, "He was raised in the muggle world,"

"How is that different?" Dobby asked.

"Yeah, how's that different?" Susan echoed. Emma asked the elves to sit with them. Instead of muggle card games they were about to get a crash course in muggle life.

"I've noticed a lot of differences," Alyx pointed out. "Susan, your family had house elves and I'm sure your aunt never treated them badly. But house elves don't exist in the muggle world."

Dan then explained, "In the muggle world if you want a chef or a maid you have to pay them." Winky gave another twitch. "Most families cannot afford to have that kind of help. Technically we could but Emma and I decided it would be a waste of Sterling. Before Hermione attended Hogwarts we would take turns cooking and we were each responsible for keeping part of the house clean," Dan told them. Susan looked as taken aback as the elves.

They talked of house elves, slavery and muggles for a bit. Dobby and Winky seemed to understand their point. Hermione realized that in reality she had been going about S.P.E.W. in the wrong way completely. If (not if, but when, she reminded herself) they won and survived the war she would certainly have some better ideas.

After an hour of discussion Emma told them that they had to get dressed. Harry wanted a formal dinner.

"He even took care of the attire." All of the objections died down at that statement.

An hour and a half later Harry called them for dinner. Dan left the bedroom with his wife on his arm and ran into the other three women.

In any world, Dan decided that they were four of the best-looking women he had ever met.

Alyx had tied her blonde hair up. Her body type was athletic in deference to her job. Dan could see the outline of muscles on her bare arms. It didn't make her look masculine, only fit. The emerald green dress robes she was wearing showed her magnificent curves. She was a very beautiful young woman. She wasn't wearing makeup but for the smallest smudge of lipstick on her lips and cheek. Dan's opinion was that she didn't need any.

He had never noticed before but she had a tattoo on her right arm just above her wrist. He had no idea what the symbols meant and made a mental note to ask the Auror with one name about it later.

Susan was wearing makeup. Her lips were the same color as the smudge that graced Alyx's cheek, Dan observed. Her own blonde hair was down in waves about her shoulders. She looked stunning in the black dress robes trimmed in purple.

Hermione wore only a bit of lip gloss. Her mass of brown curls was up in a complex braid except for a few soft tendrils that framed her face. As per the note that she had found in her room; she was wearing the ice blue backless dress that she had wanted to wear to the wedding. The dress was a little revealing for Dan's taste but that was only because he was looking at a beautiful young woman and seeing his ten year old daughter.

Emma was wearing a muggle evening dress. It was silver and backless and fell just below her knees. She had taken her hair down. It was his wife that Dan was most impressed by. Of course he always had been. Dan straightened the tie that matched his wife's dress and smiled at the younger women.

"All of you look..." He said. He couldn't find the correct word.

"I hope that is a good thing," Alyx said with a smile of her own.

Doing his best to maintain eye-contact he replied, "Oh yes. Most definitely." He smiled a dad smile at her.

He offered his daughter his free arm and escorted his wife and daughter down the stairs. In that moment he knew that he was the luckiest man on earth. Alyx and Susan followed behind.

Harry had insisted that Dobby and Winky join them. Dobby bounced around the formal dining room in excitement. Winky looked dumb struck.

“You all look wonderful,” Harry told them. None of the women missed that he was looking at Hermione as he said this. She felt her face getting warm

“And you look quite handsome yourself, Mr. Potter,” Hermione told him. He had chosen slate grey dress robes. She noted that his trim matched her own dress. Not wanting to assume anything she didn’t comment.

Harry had spent his time cooking and thinking. He had almost burnt the main course in his thoughts about Hermione. Seeing her again in the dress that had turned him speechless before the wedding made his stomach feel funny.

He pulled a chair out for Hermione. Dan did the same for his best friend. Harry, being a gentleman, walked around the table and helped Alyx and Susan into their chairs. Dobby picked Winky up and banged her on top of one of the chairs piled with pillows.

“Harry, the table looks wonderful,” Emma commented. The others agreed murmuring quietly.

The room was brightly lit. In the corner a string quartet of instruments played softly. The large oak table that they were used to seeing had been shrunk to fit just the eight of them. Each setting had a plate featuring a crest at its center. Emma looked down and frowned a bit.

“This isn’t the Black or the Potter family crest,” she commented.

“No. It’s the Granger family crest,” Harry told her.

“We have a family crest?” Hermione asked skeptically. Dan was looking at his plate in awe.

“Yes, yes, we do. I haven’t seen it since I was a kid. How did you find this?” Dan asked.

“Your daughter isn’t the only person here who knows how to use a muggle library,” Harry replied and gave Hermione a quick wink.

“Brilliant,” Susan breathed looking at her own plate.

“Is that...” Alyx asked.

“The Bones family coat of arms,” Susan declared. “The shield and sword that Aunt Amelia had were the only things left of the house after the death eaters burnt it down.”

“What about yours, Alyx?” Emma asked.

“Ravenclaw,” she said simply.

“I couldn’t find yours,” Harry told her.

“My family is Native American. Mum and Dad moved here when I was two,” Alyx explained.

“I see, so you’re a Yank?” Dan asked. Alyx grinned at him slightly.

“Yes, I am you red coat. Don’t you forget it!” She winked as she teased him.

“You’re rather blonde,” Emma observed.

“I have a very mixed heritage. My hair is from recessive DNA or something. My great great great great grandmother was a German woman. I’m told I look just like her.”

“DNA?” Susan asked.

“It’s a muggle acronym. I’d explain it but Biology was never my best subject,” Alyx told her with an apologetic smile.

Harry smiled at the muggle born witch and waved his hand over the table and the salad course appeared. It reminded Susan, Hermione and Alyx of Dumbledore. Dobby and Winky clapped in delight.

“You did that verys well Master Harry,” Winky exclaimed in excitement.

"I had a good teacher," he told her with a nod to Dobby who was still bouncing.

They ate in comfortable silence for a few minutes. Each commented on the salad and the wine. Harry had chosen a bottle of both red and white since he had no idea of the preferences of his guests. He wasn't sure what went with the dinner either. Susan had never had muggle wine before and decided to try both.

Winky and Dobby each took a few sips. Then Dobby's huge eyes got even bigger. He squeaked and looked at Winky.

"Ooooooooooh," Winky said.

"Wes must be excused Master Harry. I not knows muggle wine is the secret mating liquid of house elves," Dobby said.

"What?" Hermione asked.

"It does for us like oysters do for witches. We musts go. Be back for rest of dinners later," Winky said and with a loud snap she was gone.

"Maybes we bes back," Dobby said with a squeal and then he too snapped away. The humans left behind broke into fits of smirking and laughter. When they had all calmed down Harry again waved a hand. A wild mushroom in butter and Parmesan pasta covered the crests on their plates.

"Alyx, are your tattoos native art?" Dan asked. He took a piece of bread and passed the basket to Hermione.

"Yes. My father insisted on my siblings and I getting them. He feels that they can help my ancestors protect me."

"Can you tell us their meanings?" Hermione asked. She took a sip of water.

"My ancestors are a mix of tribes. My father is Sioux. My mother is Miami. Though that is misleading too. All four of my grandparents are from different tribes. My parents each took to the teachings of the

tribe of their mother. These symbols are a mix of many different tribe writings. My father believes that coming together as one is the only way. This symbol is my Path. Next to it is the symbol of the Great Spirit. It is to help me along my path. When I decided to become an auror the Hunt symbol was added," she told them. Alyx turned her arm so that everyone could see. She pointed to each symbol as she spoke.

"What is the fourth one?" Emma asked.

"Well," Alyx hesitated and looked a little embarrassed. "When it was discovered that I had these amazing magical powers, my father read everything he could about the magical world here in England. He already knew of the mysticism of our cultures. When he read about the Boy Who Lived well he insisted that the lightening bolt be added." Alyx finished sheepishly.

"Please tell me you're joking," Harry said, his face rapidly turning red. Alyx shook her head.

"My father picked all four of them actually. It's a tradition in my family. My whole family has Path and Great Spirit. My brothers and sisters and I each got these marks when we were twelve. The rest of the symbols differ depending on our personalities. I have two brothers and two sisters. I am the only one who received a third symbol before my fifteenth birthday. Our father picked all of our symbols for us. He's not a man you can argue with."

The conversation turned to symbols and runes. Dan tuned it out for a bit. Then he noticed that Harry was not eating. Instead, he was looking around the table with an almost sad look on his face.

"All right there, Harry?" Dan asked. Harry sighed.

"It's not fair," he replied in a soft voice.

"That's a little vague. Care to elaborate?" Emma said.

"It's not fair that Dan and I get to have a nice dinner with four of the most beautiful women in England and we have to do it here," Harry said.

"I like it here," Susan said.

"But how will all the other men know what they are missing?" Harry asked. Dan laughed.

"You want to go out in public so that you can make other men jealous?" Hermione asked in a tone that showed how pleased she was.

"Well, when you put it like that it sounds so wrong."

"It's not wrong. Half the reason I take Emma out on the town is so that I can remind myself how unlucky the others are," Dan said.

"Oh really? And if I don't want other men looking at me?" Emma asked. But Dan laughed again.

"You know as well as I do my dear Emma that you like reminding all them futile bastards just how unlucky they are. They see me dancing with you and ask themselves the same thing that I ask myself every morning. Just how in the world did I end up with her?"

"Mind your language, Daniel," Emma said softly.

"It's more than making people jealous." Harry interjected. "I wouldn't be ashamed to dance with any of you in public if you would have me."

"Even me?" Dan asked.

"You're too tall for me," Harry said lightly.

"Well, I'm crushed. Good thing I'm married to the most wonderful woman on the planet. No offense, ladies."

"I doubt dancing with me would make anyone jealous, Harry. But for the record I plan on getting that dance from you," Hermione told him. He smiled weakly.

"You're kidding right? Every girl in school was envious of you during the fourth year ball," Susan said.

"Only because of my date."

"Uh huh. If you say so."

More silence fell around the table as they thought about it. Hermione realized that Harry really did want to go out in public. Not to brag or have a trophy on his arm. He wanted the world to know how he felt. But it couldn't be done. Not now. Any woman on his arm would instantly get a target on her back.

"So, Dan, have you had time to think about my offer?" Harry asked as casually as he could a bit later. Dan had his mouth full and could not answer right away.

"We have spoken about it Harry. I am less than thrilled with the idea," Emma told him.

"What idea?" Hermione asked as she sipped her wine carefully. She was surprised that neither of her parents had objected. She had to agree with Winky and Dobby. It did give a nice warm feeling in all the right places.

"Harry has offered to let us stay here for the school year after you leave," her father told her.

"That's a brilliant idea," Hermione answered. Harry gave her a smile but it didn't reach his eyes.

"I was sure you would think so, love. But I don't like being cooped up all day. And I don't like not being able to work," the normally very active Emma replied.

"But it's safe," Harry said simply. From his conversations with Dan he has expected her resistance. It shamed him slightly that he was using the same argument that Dumbledore had used in placing him with the Dursleys as a toddler. He may have been Dumbledore's man through and through but that's didn't stop him from remembering their differences.

Dan and Emma are not children, Harry reminded himself.

"Safe? Safer than our house? Our surgery? I'm not sure where safe is anymore, Harry."

"It's safer than the house we don't have in Crawley," Hermione said in a tone that her mother was not used to. She saw the hurt look on her mum's face and immediately regretted it. Maybe wine wasn't the best thing after all.

"Do you really think we are a target?" Dan asked ignoring the words about their burned up home.

"You're not serious are you?" Alyx was completely stunned.

"Just because Hermione..." Emma began but Alyx shook her head.

"Dan, you killed Bellatrix Lestrange. She was one of Voldemort's top Death Eaters. Very few people could land a spell on her. Or near her," Alyx qualified.

Dan cringed a little. He didn't like being reminded that he had killed someone.

"Daddy, don't you dare feel bad about it. That woman was a horrible, nasty and evil...witch."

"Those were her good qualities. Aunt Amelia used to visit Frank and Alice Longbottom once a month. I often went with her but nothing ever changed," Susan commented.

"Who are they?" Emma asked. Hermione sighed softly.

"You've heard me speak of Neville?" She asked. Her mother nodded. "They're his parents. They have been in the long care ward at St. Mungo's for many years."

"Bellatrix tortured them into insanity," Harry said very grimly. She even used the same curse on Neville at the department of mysteries fight a year ago." Harry did not mention Sirius. He didn't have to.

"You deserve a medal for taking her down," Alyx told Dan firmly. She sighed at the looks she was getting. "I know, I know. Killing is wrong. But defending ourselves is not. By killing her you were defending more than yourself Dan. You were defending the muggle world. I've read her briefing scrolls and her favorite sport was muggle hunting. Do you know what that is?"

"I can probably guess," Dan said feeling slightly sick. But the beautiful young Auror cadet shook her head.

"It is defined very vaguely. The term covers everything from invading a muggle house to torture and murder of the family to kidnapping for slavery and worse."

"Worse?" Emma asked not really wanting to know. She laid down her fork.

"Much worse. During the first war there were many nights where the Dark Lord had treated his followers to dark celebrations. Do you remember back in the late seventies when the MacCavoy school children went missing?"

"That was the result of a 'celebration'?" Dan asked horrified.

"Yes. Fifty death eaters and ten teenage girls. I can't tell you what they did to them. Even if I knew I wouldn't. I do know that one of the girls was a muggle born witch whose parents refused to send her to Hogwarts. Coincidence, maybe. Maybe not. The point is you would be an easy target at your surgery and the Ministry couldn't afford to station a team of Aurors there six days a week."

"I would feel much better if both of you remained here. It's the second safest place in England. I'd take you to Hogwarts but if we did that everyone would want to have their parents there," Harry informed them.

"It's... I just feel useless here. I can't help with the war. I can't fight. But I can not sit back and watch my daughter die while I am in hiding," Emma said her voice shaking more with each word. Dan took her hand in his.

"I will do everything in my power to keep her safe. I promise you that, Emma," Harry told her firmly.

"Mum. I'm not on the front line. I'm in the research and medical group," Hermione reminded her. Emma let go of Dan's hand as she turned to Hermione. Emma knew her daughter had no point of reference for what she was feeling.

"And in the end where will you be? I know you Hermione Jane. You won't let Harry go off and face his destiny with out you. You never have," Dan replied.

"No. I won't allow..." Harry stopped speaking when he saw the look on Hermione's face.

"Won't allow what?" She snapped.

"Won't allow you to break ranks again and run into the middle of a fire fight you are not prepared for," Harry told her in a tone that brokered no argument.

"Again?" Emma asked alarmed. "Is there something you need to tell us Hermione?"

Oh Bloody Hell, Hermione thought.

"I reacted to my emotions and not my head during the battle at Hogsmeade." The simple statement was the truth but Hermione knew it wouldn't be enough for Emma. The look on her mother's face told

her that there was an uncomfortable discussion in her future. Worse yet, her father was saying nothing.

"Hermione. You said it yourself. Research. That's what you're best at," Alyx told her.

"Yes, I am. But I'll be damned if I let my best friend face that evil bastard alone." Hermione was firm but she knew it was hopeless.

"I won't be alone. If you were prepared I wouldn't dream of trying to stop you Hermione. But you're not," he told her. He finished in a very quiet voice, meeting her eyes with his.

"I know. I can't get my Patronus to form when Dementors are near. The greater wizarding world may think they are no longer a threat but I suspect otherwise. Besides that, my dueling skills are sub par at best. I couldn't touch Harry in a duel."

It was more than obvious that Hermione was not happy about either of the facts.

"I don't know Hermione. In a fair duel I think you could probably beat me. It's tough for a Ravenclaw to admit but you certainly know more spells than I do. But Death Eaters don't fight fair. Your skills aren't that bad and I can help you. Maybe we can work together on the Patronus charm," Alyx offered.

"That doesn't answer my question though. Dan, Emma. We have so much to worry about. I don't like you thinking you are useless. You're not. You've helped me in ways this summer that are just as important as learning to duel or figuring out who to put in harms way. If nothing else you've kept me human," Harry told them. He saw the confusion on Emma's face so he continued.

"In all honesty you two have been more like parents to me than anybody I have ever known. The Dursleys saw me as a nuisance at best and a horrid freak at worst. I love the Weaselys. I really do. But Molly sometimes felt like a jailer. The summer after the Tri-Wizarding Tournament was terrible and Molly made it worse with her distraction

techniques. She led the movement to keep the kiddies in the dark. I understand why but it wasn't what I, er, we needed.

Emma you gave me a lecture on making sure that I eat my vegetables. Dan you taught me how to play golf and different ways to think about things. Both of you have done everything you could to take care of me, well all of us, this summer. It's very easy to see how Hermione became the woman she is."

Harry was looking at his plate when he finished speaking. He didn't see the tears in the eyes of the four young women. Dan took Emma's hand again and she gave a small nod. He had to clear his throat to speak.

"Harry, we care about you. Don't ever forget that. And if it makes your life easier then we will stay here for the duration. I do have to ask that you owl Emma once in a while. She expects it from her kid."

Harry's head snapped up. He saw the tears on Emma's face and frowned. But she smiled.

"Yes, I do," she told him. Harry felt his heart warm. Across the table Susan sniffed her tears back.

"I got the same lecture on vegetables. What does that mean?" She said in an attempt to lighten the mood.

"You can send your letters along with Brigid, just like these two," Emma replied. Hermione chuckled softly and then hugged her mum.

"You've always wanted more children," she whispered into her mum's ear. Emma held on tighter. She pulled back and looked into her daughters' eyes. She liked what she saw there and realized that Harry was correct. The little girl who had at the age of seven declared that she was never going to grow up had broken her promise.

"I feel left out," Alyx told them with a pout.

They all laughed breaking the tension. But the other feelings remained.

"Do you golf?" Dan asked her.

"No," she said in a playful sadness.

"Thank Merlin. I don't think the normal topics on the course would be proper with a lady around," Harry said. He realized what he had said too late.

"Oh really? And what would these topics be, Mr. Potter?" Hermione asked. She had a feeling she knew what men talked about when the women were not around.

"Private man things, honey," Dan replied.

"Man things?" Alyx asked laughing. "I work with Bob Sunset and a host of Aurors that talk about Man Things all the time. Please tell me you don't talk about your dangly down bits."

"We did discuss shaft stiffness," he mentioned to the horror struck women, "but it had to do with sand wedges and swing speed. We mostly talk about beautiful women and life. Yes, Hermione we talk about you and your mum. Deal with it," Harry said wickedly.

Hermione blushed. Did he really think she was beautiful?

"Well, Alyx, you already eat your veggies. I know because I checked." Emma said to steer the conversation back around. "Hermione can tell you that I have a whole host of mum lectures. If you really want, I'm sure I can find an appropriate one."

"I'll get back to you on that," Alyx said smiling at the kind hearted woman. She picked up her fork and took another bite. Her food was still warm.

"Warming charm on the plate," Harry said to her unasked question.

Dinner continued without much in the way of talk. Harry felt everything that needed to be said had been. At least on that topic.

He knew it was time to move past Ginny. But did he really want to put someone else in the danger of his destiny?

Hermione would be the most logical choice. He knew Dan was right. Hermione would follow him to and through the gates of Hell without thinking twice. She had proven it the night Hogsmeade had been attacked. But it wasn't just logic that lead him to Hermione. There had always been something else between them whether he wanted to admit to it or not.

Winky and Dobby joined them as they finished dessert. Dobby ate three plates of pasta. Winky tore into the chocolate mousse dessert. None of the humans were brave enough to ask.

After dinner Harry asked Emma for a dance and she agreed. As the eight of them stood up the table split into four smaller tables and scattered to the edge of the room. The string quartet began to play more loudly.

"Thank you," Harry told Emma as they started to move about the floor. Seeing her puzzled look he continued. "For being here this summer. I really don't know what I would have done without you and Dan."

"It was our pleasure," she told him.

"Would you really want to help out with the war?" he asked a few minutes later. She was surprised but she nodded.

"The research team has found some references to muggle libraries and landmarks. Hermione is the only one of the team that has any idea how to begin to use a muggle library. Or a computer. She could use some help."

"I would be delighted," she said lightly. He smiled. Harry knew where Hermione got her excellent study skills.

Use every tool you have, he heard Dumbledore say in his head.

They all danced.

Dobby and Winky held on to each other tightly and rocked back and forth. Emma was a bit afraid that they would get a lesson in house elf mating on the dance floor.

Emma danced with her husband glad to have the opportunity more than anything. Like Harry, Dan danced with all of the women but he held Emma against him in a way that could not be mistaken.

Harry enjoyed spending a few minutes with each of the women. Dan's assessment had been correct – they were each beautiful in their own way, but Harry took the extra minute to learn that they each possessed inner beauty, strength and exceptional character.

Hermione flinched a little watching her parents. She knew what they were going to be doing tonight and she really didn't want to think about it.

"Miss Granger will you do me the honor of letting me step on your toes?" Harry asked in a formal tone as he offered Hermione his hand.

"I would be charmed," she replied. He led her to the middle of the room and carefully placed his hand on her hip.

"I'm sorry about that slip there. I thought you had told them," he began but she shook her head.

"It's quite alright Harry. I should have told them," she responded truthfully.

"I guess I never thought about them being your parents. Worrying like that," Harry as he managed to step on her right foot. She didn't acknowledge her foot. Instead she looked introspective.

"I'm not going to complain Harry. Not when you, Tonks, Susan and too many others have no parents to worry over you."

"Yours do that nicely," he said in an almost wondrous tone.

They both contemplated what that meant as she worked to avoid his feet. He really wasn't that bad a dancer, but she was grateful that he was only wearing stockings rather than his dragon hide boots.

"Hermione, I wanted you to know how beautiful I think you are tonight. Not just tonight though..."

"Oh Harry," she said realizing that he meant it and not knowing what else to say.

They danced for a few minutes getting closer to each other with each step. It didn't take long before her head was on his shoulder. He was extremely conscious of his hand gently caressing her very bare back.

"They seem to like each other," she heard Harry comment. She followed his glance to Susan and Alyx who were dancing on the other side of the room. Hermione agreed.

They silently continued to move. Hermione could see the parallel of their whole relationship in the movements they were making. They had started apart - At arms length. Gradually they had moved together and now they held each other close. Harry was her best friend. More than that would be too much to hope for. Hermione knew how she felt. His feelings were unclear to her.

Harry attempted to put the war out of his head and concentrate on the beautiful intelligent wonderful witch in his arms. He didn't tell her that he was going to ask both of her muggle parents to join the Order. He didn't say that he had been thinking about asking Dan from the moment that Harry had realized exactly what had happened to Bellatrix.

No, tonight was about other things. Tonight was about the reasons they were fighting in this war.

"We need to talk," he told her softly when the song ended. She nodded. He kissed her on her cheek. The kiss represented the uncertain feelings well. She could feel Harry's confusion.

Later that night, Hermione was brushing out her wild mane of curls when there was a soft knock on her door. She flicked her wand and the door opened. Harry stood uncertainly on the threshold.

"Come in," she invited. He did as she asked and stood near her. He watched in fascination as she continued to brush her hair. After a minute he took the brush from her hand, stepped behind her and began to do it himself. She closed her eyes enjoying the attention and sensation of his hand smoothing her hair. When he finished he led her to the cushy love seat that sat in front of her fireplace. They sat facing each other. She flicked her wand and a small fire began to burn.

"Hermione, I know we need to talk about what is happening between us. But I don't even know where to begin," he said.

"Then let me talk. You can listen," she started.

Maybe it was the wine she had consumed. Maybe it was the fact that her own fear and hesitation had cost her in the past. Maybe it was that she could no longer deny it. Hermione wasn't sure what made her do it. But she told him the truth.

"Remember in our ride on Buckbeak? I was scared to death Harry. You have no idea how much I hate heights. But I knew I had to do it. For Sirius. For you. So I did. Once we were in the air I realized that I was safe with you. I faced my fear that night. The following summer all I could think about was how it felt to fly with you. Honestly all I could think about was you."

"But..." She placed a finger on his lips. He pulled her hand down and held it in his.

"Let me finish, Harry. So then came fourth year. As soon as I heard about the Yule Ball I knew that I wanted you to ask me. But you only had eyes for Cho. You have no idea how frustrated I was with you. At the time I believed that my two best friends were boys who would never see me as more than a bushy haired, buck toothed bookworm. Merlin, that hurt in a way that I didn't even understand."

“Do you know why I agreed to go to the Ball with Victor?” She asked as she choked back the feelings that were threatening to overwhelm her.

“Because he asked you first?” Harry answered, hoping there was nothing still brewing between Hermione and Victor.

“Well, there was that too. Mostly because I hoped it would get your attention. I hated myself for becoming one of those girls who play stupid games. Worse yet, it didn’t work. You still only had eyes for Cho. Though I did get Ron’s attention.” She sighed. She pulled her hand from his at the confession.

“I didn’t see Ron as a second choice, Harry. Never. I really liked him. I miss him more than I can articulate properly. After the tournament was over, my feelings really didn’t matter. There were bigger things that needed to be addressed.”

They were both quite for a moment reflecting on what the end of the tournament had held.

“When you were stuck with those awful relatives of yours before fifth year Ron and I had a lot of time alone. It became obvious to me that he felt something for me, which is a lot more than I could say about you. You were so angry. Not that you didn’t have a good reason. I did everything I could to help you. I tried so hard to get you to talk to me. To maybe get you the help you needed. Even as just a friend. And we did work well together, didn’t we? Yes, I still wanted more but it seemed that you still were thinking about Cho. If it weren’t for the fact that year five was so messed up, something could have developed between Ron and I.”

“After Sirius died I knew that you needed your friends more than ever and I was determined to be there for you. But as you know, I failed miserably. Ron was backing away from his feelings for me and I couldn’t stand it. You were almost cheating in potions with that extra book and getting better grades than I was. Seeing Ron and Lavender snog in the common room made me insane with jealousy. I’d just become completely irrelevant in your lives. I felt so alone.”

She had to stop and collect herself. The memory of what she had felt was crashing over her again.

"I was completely irrational. I wanted to hex both of you to Hell and back. I wasn't over you but I knew that you would never see me that way. Ron had at one time had feelings for me. But he passed me over for a few quick feels under Lavender's robes and having his tonsils removed by her tongue. You have no idea how that felt. I may have understood what I was feeling but I couldn't control it."

She brushed away some of the errant tears angrily.

"Ron and I did eventually work it out. He had to be poisoned for it to happen which says a lot about our mutual stubbornness. And you developed feelings for Ginny, or at least started noticing that she was a girl. I swear you can be a brick sometimes. Ginny always loved you Harry. At first it was the whole Boy Who Lived fantasy. After she realized that he was a myth, she became your friend and realized that you were better than the Boy Who Lived."

"She also knew about my feelings for you. She was my closest girlfriend. Who else would I tell?" She said to the surprised look on his face.

"She never said anything," Harry told her. Hermione nodded.

"I didn't want her to. She also thought that it would have been pretty stupid on her part to give herself some competition." Hermione laughed almost bitterly.

"Like I'm competition for anyone, let alone someone as kind and beautiful as Ginny. She didn't have anything to worry about. You never thought about me that way. I had realized that long before you and Ginny got together. I had moved on. Yes, it hurt. Merlin it hurt. But I would live. A broken heart isn't fatal. And I knew that I could be happy with someone else. Or at least that is what I told myself."

She closed her eyes briefly and then took a deep breath.

“Ron and I weren’t working. How horrible is that? I spent almost a year being awful to him and Lavender and they were better together than he and I would ever be. I needed someone I can talk to. Ron, dear man that he is, wasn’t it. I’d listen to him talk about the Canons or Quidditch or food. I’d even participate in the conversation the best I could. But anything that I wanted to discuss was off limits. I’d get a new book and he’d laugh at me. ‘Haven’t you read every book ever written?’ he asked me once. I’d try to tell him about what I was reading or thinking and he’d just tune me out. He wouldn’t even try to listen to me. Sometimes I think the only thing we had in common was a troll in the bathroom.” Tears were streaming down her cheeks and he helped brush them away.

After a moment she continued. “I know he wasn’t interested in my studies. I could understand that. Not everyone wants to talk about spell creation or advanced transfiguration techniques. But he never even considered that talking about Quidditch all the time dulled my mind. He never considered how I felt.”

She sighed. Harry had known that Ron was a bit insensitive. It bothered him to hear how Ron had hurt her, how they both had, actually.

Harry kept brushing her hair as she spoke. The contact made her feel like the wine had. “That wasn’t the worst of it though. He also wasn’t interested in my past. He told me that he thought muggles were bizarre. He acted like they have some sort of contagious disease. He was sure that he would never want to be around them. Any of them. It never occurred to him that he was talking about my parents. Talking about me. He didn’t want to know anything about the muggle world. Sometimes his mind was as closed as some of the pure blood bigots that we are fighting. He wasn’t malicious about it. He just did care to know about it. To know about me.”

Taking a steadying breath, she continued. “I was going to break it off with him after the wedding. I couldn’t have you, and Ron wasn’t what I needed. I would rather be alone than to live a lie like that. But then Ron made the biggest mistake of his life and Ginny got killed. I love them both, Harry. Ron made no effort to understand me. I suppose the same could be said of me. But he was always there. He was

funny and for the most part kind. Ginny was like a sister to me. You wouldn't believe the way we would laugh sometimes. I'd have never told you any of this if she were alive. I wanted you both to be happy. And you were happy together."

Feeling his hand slowly stroking her hair, she concluded saying, "I feel horribly guilty telling you this now but it's time to move on. Ginny's gone. Ron's gone. I didn't tell you how I felt before because I was too afraid. If nothing else, I learn from my mistakes. Do you understand why I broke rank and tried to get to Hogsmeade? You're all I have left in the wizarding world." She waved off his objection with an angry gesture. "Yes, I know. There are others. But I don't love them like I do you or Ron or Ginny. I care about them but they aren't my family. You are. Ron and Ginny were. I do want more than just your friendship Harry. But if that is all you can give me I understand."

Hermione was openly crying and not bothering to fight the tears. Her last statement was one of the biggest lies she had ever spoken. She couldn't and wouldn't understand. But she would accept it if she had to.

Harry was absolutely stunned. He opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out. Instead he pulled her close and let her cry on his shoulder. She felt warm against him. She felt good. He felt guilty. He could hear the dream he had of Ginny telling him to marry a nice witch.

She pulled away after a few minutes and his arms felt empty.

"I... Bloody Hell Hermione. I don't even know what to say," he told her. She smiled a little and wiped her face. He pulled her hand down and wiped her tears for her.

"I know... It's unfair. I've had years to deal with how I feel and you've had about two minutes. I don't need you to say anything tonight Harry. I just needed to let you know."

The silence was beginning to get uncomfortable when Harry heard a strange noise. He reached for his wand but Hermione stopped him. He noticed her face getting red and she looked at the wall behind her

bed. He listened for a few more seconds trying to figure out what the noise was.

“Daniel...” Was that Emma? What was... MERLIN! Harry thought as he realized what he was hearing. He clamped a hand over his mouth almost in horror. Hermione flicked her wand and the noise went was gone. She shrugged.

“You get used to it after 16 years,” she said. When their eyes met they both burst into laughter. The uncomfortable silence was gone.

“Hermione, I... I had no idea. I’m either blind, or you hid it very well. Lately I’ve been having some feelings for you. But even as I think about you or feel something for you, I get a horrible sensation of guilt. I know Ginny would want me to move on.”

He sighed and told her about the vision he had in the hospital after Ginny died.

“I tried to lose myself into the war. But it didn’t work. I wasn’t kidding when I told your parents that they had kept me human. Dan and I have talked about moving on. He’s not very subtle with the hints. I know he’d like to see us dating. I never really considered you until he suggested it.

He didn’t miss that she flinched. She looked at her hands that were clasped tightly in her lap.

“I’m sorry I hurt you Hermione. So sorry. I don’t think you were hiding it very well or Cho would not have gotten so jealous. Why didn’t you say something?”

“You’ve always treated me as if I were just one of the guys. You’ve never showed the slightest bit of interest in me.”

Harry ran a hand through his messy hair and stared into the fire.

“You’re right. I never considered that you might want something different than being friends. I mean you’re Hermione. You’re just always there. Always. Until you weren’t. Know why I used that damn

potions book? Because finally I was able to be good at potions. Finally I was able to do something well.”

“Harry...”

“No, Hermione. I’m rubbish at almost everything besides Quidditch. Well there’s defense but that’s more self-preservation than anything else. You’ve been at the top of our class from day one. I didn’t realize it before then but I was jealous of that.”

“I work very hard to maintain my marks,” she said defensively.

“I know. And you did your best to get Ron and I to maintain ours. You didn’t have to and I know that more than once I wished you would just leave me alone. I didn’t appreciate what you were doing then. I know now what an idiot I was. My stubborn insistence in using that stupid book almost cost me the most important person in my life.”

Harry took another sip of his butterbeer and confessed, “When your Dad started hinting that you’d make a nice girl to date, I realized how thick I really am. A brick is pretty mild.” He looked at her and asked, “You know what I want in a girlfriend, Hermione?”

She shook her head still not looking up. He placed two fingers under her chin and lifted her face. He needed to see her eyes.

“I want someone I can talk to. I want someone who knows me, all of me, and still loves me. I want someone who will put up with my mood swings and who will put me in my place. I want someone who is honest with me no matter what. I want someone who will protect me and allow me to protect her. She has to be smart, fun and have a sense of humor. I maybe the thickest man on the planet Hermione but even I can see that someone is you.”

He leaned in and brushed his lips on hers. Hermione froze not believing what was happening. As he pulled away she cursed herself for ruining the kiss. She called on her Gryffindor courage and leaned forward to meet him again.

There were no bells. Nor were there whistles. Hermione didn't feel the top of her head wanting to blow off as Lavender had once described.

Instead the kiss was comforting in a way that neither of them could have imagined. Harry felt as if he were safe for the first time in his life. Hermione knew in her heart that Harry would never leave her side.

She opened her mouth as she felt his tongue pressing for entrance. Suddenly the feelings changed. It was as if the world had stopped moving. All she knew was Harry. All he knew was Hermione.

Harry pressed harder against her and she wrapped her arms around his neck. She pulled him against her wanting much more. Eventually they broke apart both panting slightly. She leaned her forehead into his chest listening to his heartbeat.

I love you Harry, she thought with every cell in her body

I love you Hermione, he thought as he felt exactly the same thing that she had been thinking.

It was a long time before they moved.

... --- ...

Dan whistled an off tune rendition of 'I got you babe' as he placed his toothbrush in the holder. It was early and his wife was still in bed. He had considered waking her up for a repeat performance of the night before. But Emma was not exactly a morning person so he let her sleep. There was no need to ruin his mood.

He snuck out of the bedroom door and then started whistling softly again. His step was a bit lighter than normal and he wore a lucky man's smirk. Instead of going downstairs he turned right and went to check on his daughter.

Her door was open so he poked his head in expecting to see her curled up reading.

The whistling stopped. Harry was asleep on the loveseat with his little girl. His Dad instincts stopped berating him for pushing Harry to see Hermione as more when he realized that they were still fully dressed. Hermione was curled on her side behind Harry. Her arm was draped across his stomach.

They looked peaceful. Dan stared at them for a few seconds then he silently crept away.

There may have been a bloody war raging outside the house. But right now the world had just gotten a little more right. He started whistling, as he was halfway down the stairs. It was going to be a beautiful day.

... --- ...

As Dan had been dancing with Emma, Riddle had returned to the lake containing over a thousand corpses. Two millennia ago, they had been an invading army and had been cursed for their failure. Riddle picked up the ancient scrolls and began the series of lengthy incantations that would reanimate this army of ancient damned warriors within eight weeks.

For thirty-six hours Riddle read aloud the words of the scrolls in precise order until he saw the bolt of lightning strike the still water. He rested for a few minutes before standing. Closing his eyes, he could envision the damage that his army would bring on those who dared to stand in his way.

“Match your pitiful sword against this army, Harry Potter.”

... --- ...

A/N

Dee wrote much of this chapter. Please read and review either here or on the Yahoo group.

Thanks.

O-C

Chapter 17

September 1

Harry woke up a few minutes after Dan had walked by. He gently untangled himself from Hermione's arms, kissed her gently on the forehead, and went into his room to shower and get dressed. He placed his battle gear in one trunk, his books in another and his clothing in his old school trunk.

He had been very tempted to apparate to the castle with Hermione, but due to their head boy and head girl responsibilities, knew that they had to take the train.

Harry had decided to take the seventh year charms and transfiguration classes as well as his private lessons with Moody and Bill. He recalled that most seventh year students took five classes so he hoped that he would have time for everything. The DA would begin on Tuesday and Thursday evenings.

Hermione would have preferred to take all of the classes, but had been talked down to Transfiguration, Charms, Potions, Arithmancy and Defense. She had blocked off six hours a week for the Research Group. Apparently the concept of being a part-time student was relative.

... --- ...

Dan sat in the kitchen deciding if he should gift Harry with an awkwardly worded "dad speech." By his third cup of coffee he had envisioned several but with discretion prevailing, discarded each of them. He prayed that his daughter and her lover would return at the end of the school year alive and healthy. Her virginity would have to be her decision.

When Harry came down a few minutes later he greeted the young man warmly. "Hi Harry. Coffee?"

"Please. Thanks. Anything in the news?"

“Actually yes. Your uncle's old home was destroyed in a fire yesterday afternoon. It doesn't appear that anyone was injured.”

Harry sat thoughtfully for a moment, glad that he'd previously moved his only remaining relatives to the States.

Dan considered his words carefully, looked at the young man with the longish hair for a moment and said, “Do what you can to keep her safe Harry. She's irreplaceable.”

Harry met Dan's eyes and nodded. “I will, sir.”

“I know. You're a good man, Harry. Are we still on for next Sunday?”

“8:10. I'll be there. Can you bring my clubs?”

“They're in the boot of my car. Next summer, we'll play a round at the Old Course.”

They shook hands, having taken care of the important business. Just then Hermione came into the kitchen and Harry's face lit up. Hermione also had the brightest smile on her face, looking happier than she had all summer. Harry paused, looking at Dan nervously, trying to decide what was appropriate. Deciding that he had seen Dan give Emma a good morning kiss many times, he stood up as she approached and gave her a kiss and a hug. Both may have lasted a bit longer than the usual greetings Dan gave Emma, though.

Dan gave them a sly look as they broke apart. “Uh, Harry, are you sure there wasn't any other news that we needed to discuss this morning?”

Linking their arms as they turned toward him, both faces flaming, Harry finally managed a reply. “Well, I kinda decided to take your advice.”

Dan burst into laughter, and at that moment Emma came into the room, having paused outside listening to the previous exchange. Hugs and congratulations were exchanged all around, and Hermione couldn't stop smiling all the way through breakfast.

Eventually Susan and Alyx, who had also been up late the night before, came into the kitchen for breakfast. Seeing the smiles around the table and noticing how closely Harry and Hermione were sitting, and recalling how closely they had been dancing the evening before, they made the obvious conclusion.

“Congratulations, you two,” said Alyx, crossing over to give Hermione a hug. “It took you long enough,” added Susan. “You’ve been dancing around each other ever since Harry’s birthday party.”

Harry and Hermione took all this good-naturedly. Hermione told Susan they didn’t want to make a big deal about it at school and Susan promised to keep it to herself.

At 9:30 the two adults and three students left for the Kings Cross station and arrived shortly after 10:00. Alyx and the other cadets would apparate to the castle after lunch.

Dobby had already taken their trunks to the castle and personally put them away. Hermione had talked with her mum about leaving voice mail messages on the cell phone. They could pick them up by going out of the castle and walking to Hogsmeade station. Emma felt the same lump in her throat that she’d had years ago when she’d said goodbye to Dan on his way to the Falklands.

Taking both of them in her arms she gave a mighty hug and said, “I love you. Take care of each other and come home as soon as you can. She gave Susan a hug and said, “You too. Have a good term.” She turned and met her husband half way back to the car. Harry took Hermione’s hand, smiled at her nervously, took a deep breath and together they walked through the barrier at 9 3/4.

... --- ...

Inside the platform, Harry and Hermione were delighted to see so many students come through the barrier. The station was filled with Aurors in their uniforms while others had been stationed in plain clothing outside the barrier. As Minerva had requested, Harry and to a lesser extent Hermione greeted each of the students as they came

through the barrier, most accompanied by a nervous looking mother or father.

Noticeably absent were the sixth and seventh year Slytherins. Hermione recalled that the majority of them had been expelled, arrested or were dead. The others apparently felt the guilt of association and stayed away. She hoped that the younger ones would take a different path in life. Soon it was time to board the train and they made their way to the head student compartment in the back of the train.

Hermione ran the prefect meeting, encouraging each of the students to avoid prejudices against other students, be as helpful as they could to the younger students and she challenged each of the students to make five new friendships during the year with students from other houses and years.

Sending the prefects on their way, they took time to meet with as many of the first year students as they could. On strict instructions from Hermione, Harry visited for a minute or two with each new student allowing them to ask questions and stare at his scar, doing everything that he could to be approachable.

"Wotcher Harry," said a smiling Tonks after they had been on their way for several hours. "That was a very gracious move on your part. The head boy in my first year was a real stuck up wanker. I'm proud of you that you took a few minutes to make everyone feel welcome and get off to a good start. That shows real leadership."

"It was the right thing to do," replied Harry. He wasn't looking for recognition from anyone, but didn't want to argue with her. "The nice thing about catching them before they're sorted is there're no preconceived notions on anyone's part. At this point, they're not Slytherins or Ravenclaws yet, just Dan or Ericka, just people."

Tonks nodded, and saw the sad smile on Harry's face. Casting a silencing charm around them she asked, "Is there another reason you spent your time talking with the little kids?"

Harry nodded, saying, "I miss him, and I'm not looking to add to the rumor mill."

She gave him a peck on the cheek and whispered, "Congratulations, lover boy. You two are good for each other. "

"Huh?"

"While you've been spending all of your time with the first years, Hermione and I have been catching up."

Harry nodded and smiled back. For once his emerald eyes looked bright and full of life.

... --- ...

Abraxan and Thomas both waited in anticipation of news regarding the Hogwarts Express. Thomas had posted two Aurors on the train and had two others flying disillusioned on brooms. The broom riding Aurors had been issued cellular telephones and had each checked in once.

At three the train was in the area where if it were to be attacked, logically it would.

At three twenty, Thomas received a call from Straighthand, who had volunteered for the aerial duty, that all was clear and the train was proceeding normally. He checked in again each time there was a signal available.

When it appeared that there would be no problem on the train, Thomas asked the squad of Aurors that had been mustered to apparate to Hogsmeade station and be available, but inconspicuous from the students.

... --- ...

Minerva waited anxiously for word that the students had arrived safely. She felt personally responsible for their safety today having lobbied for days to receive permission to keep the school open.

She was relieved beyond measure when she saw the students file into the front door. Better yet, almost all of the students had returned, with at least a dozen having reregistered within just the last few days. The newspaper article from Potter had eventually swung most of the non-Slytherin house students to come. Unfortunately at least a dozen of the students were coming for the year because their parents had been killed. The school had never been the home of so many orphans.

"Hello Professor," greeted Neville, smiling at her. "It's good to see you."

"Good evening, Mr. Longbottom," she said, glad to have so many Order members living in the castle this year.

Filius Flitwick had wanted to lead the first year students into the great hall for many years, but the honor had traditionally gone to the Assistant Head. This year he had gotten his wish. Many of the students weren't too much taller than he was and the gentle and brilliant professor projected a very different image than McGonagall had with her stern looks. There were 55 first year students this year, one of the larger classes that the school had recently seen.

... --- ...

Harry watched as the students made their way to the sorting hat. As they got to it, a rip at the base appeared, and it began its song.

A thousand years or more ago a task was given to me

To sort through the minds of those who came our way

The brave, the wise, the hard workers and also the clever

I've sorted many through the years and this I have to say

This year you will be tested like no other

Fall into darkness or see the light of day

Led by the one who wields the sword
Heed closely the words that he will say
Together you can succeed
Alone you will fall
The castle will protect you
With its pillars and its walls
Now come and place me on your head
I'll tell you where you're at
Be friends with all and light you'll see
For I'm the sorting hat!

As usual, Hermione was busy scribbling down the words that the hat had spoken, and noted that it didn't have the same proper meter as in previous years. Soon the hat had sorted the students into houses. Harry was surprised to see that only four had been placed into Slytherin. He recalled from his own sorting, thinking, "Not Slytherin." Maybe some of the other students had done the same. Maybe the Death Eaters children were being sent elsewhere. Harry noticed the first year students greeted by their housemates as they made their way to their respective tables.

Minerva rose and the hall grew silent.

"Good evening and welcome to a very special year at Hogwarts. New students are especially welcomed. Returning students, we are glad to see each and every one of you again. Please take the time this year to reach outside of your own houses and get to know as many of your classmates as you can." Hermione wished that Dumbledore had said those words in her earlier years. In truth, she hated the idea of different houses and all of the rivalry that they created.

McGonagall continued. "As you all know, the wizarding world is at war. Hogwarts is a school firmly place on the light side. Acts of aggression, threats or violence initiated against innocent students will result in expulsion and arrest. You have been warned." Harry wished that Dumbledore had spoken those words during his first year.

"We believe that the castle is the safest place for students in Britain. Should you see any condition or activity that you believe to be unsafe, I ask you to please report it to one of the professors, a prefect or the head boy or head girl immediately."

"There are a number of staff changes this year. Mrs. Figg will be the castle caretaker. Mr. Filch and Mrs. Norris decided to leave the castle's service." This was met with a rather larger than expected round of applause.

She continued, "Professor Slughorn has taken over as head of Slytherin house." Again there was a large round of applause. He was the logical choice to replace Snape as he had been head of the house before.

She continued. "The ministry was invited to hold some of the Auror cadet training here, providing us increased protection as well as access to some of the Auror teaching staff. As a result the classroom portions of Defense against the Dark Arts classes will be instructed by a rotating team of ministry Aurors." Again there was a smattering of applause as the eight Aurors and cadets stood.

"Finally, Head Boy Harry Potter has volunteered to lead his Defense Association group again this year. It will meet Tuesday evening and Thursday evenings with different groups for the newer and for the more experienced students." There was a huge round of applause and cheering over this news. Minerva realized how foolish it had been not to continue with the group last year. "Mr. Potter, perhaps you'd like to say a few words about it."

Harry got up to speak, glad that he'd discussed this previously with Hermione. "The first meetings will be this Tuesday and Thursday evenings for the first though fourth year students. I would ask that any

previous DA members also attend those meetings. I would ask that the fifth through seventh year students come next Tuesday and Thursday.” His intent was to separate those students into what would become the advanced and the beginner sections for their respective age groups. He wanted to give them each a week off to work on their other things and practice that they’d learned.

After Minerva dismissed the students, Harry and Hermione made their way to the visitor suites. After they unlocked the door and walked in, they took a moment to look around. They were the size of a typical two bedroom flat without the kitchen. They each had their own bedroom with a very spacious sitting area, several worktables, sofas and large area rugs. It was well lit and had a window with a view of the lake. Hermione smiled at her good luck and said, “This is over twice as large as the regular head student suite.”

Harry replied, “My bedroom at the Dursleys wasn’t much bigger than the cupboard that they used to lock me in. The space is nice, but the company is much better,” he said, smiling at her.

She put her bag down, gave him a huge hug and said, “That’s so sweet. Did my dad have any parting words for you?”

Mostly to remind me that you’re irreplaceable and that I should take good care of you. Did your mum say anything?”

“About the same, except she was talking about you.” She gazed into his eyes for a moment and asked, “Which room would you like?” Part of her was hoping that he’d say her room.

“Either is fine. You pick. I need to go see Neville for a bit. I’ll be back in twenty minutes.”

Harry went to Gryffindor tower. The common room was thinning out. Harry said “Hi” to Lavender, Seamus, Dean and Neville.

Lavender asked, “How do you like the head boy suite? I’d spent some time in it during fifth year.”

Harry chose his words carefully and said, "Professor McGonagall put us in one of the empty visitor rooms on the third floor. It seems fine." He didn't really want to hear what Lavender had been doing in Roger Davies' room when she was fifteen or discuss the equipment that he'd brought into the castle.

... --- ...

While Harry was listening to Lavender, Riddle had brought Lucius to see him. Lucius was a bit less assuming than Snape and knelt down in front of the Dark Lord until he was asked to sit. Malfoy asked, "How may I serve you, My Lord?"

"What is the political value of the castle right now?"

Malfoy considered the question for a moment and replied, "The ministry has placed most of its eggs in the one basket. They are using the school to present a business as usual face for the wizarding world. One newspaper interview with Potter virtually erased the justified fear that most parents had of sending their child to the castle. It's a faith that could easily be broken."

"Go on."

"Apparently the wizarding world is quick to forget the 200 deaths that you caused wielding the dementors because Potter managed to kill a few of them in return. The loss of 200 students at the castle would bring the ministry to its knees. They have invested too much in promising that the children would be safe there."

"I believe you are correct Lucius. I have cast the spells to awaken an ancient army of soldiers from Caesar's time. The boy's sword will be no match against a legion. Here's my plan..."

... --- ...

Class started the next day. Though all of Harry's instructors were members of the Order that he led, he easily fell back into the role of student. Flitwick's first unit covered ways to strengthen spells and to

cast them quickly. Harry was pleased but a bit surprised at the topics, as they were towards the end of the text that Flitwick had selected.

After class the diminutive professor asked, "Mr. Potter, may I have a word?"

Harry set his books down and Flitwick charmed the door shut. He said, "Harry the extra ten percent of power that you could put into your spells just might make the difference between your spell breaking through Voldemort's shield or it holding. The tenth of a second that you might shave off of casting your spell might make the difference between Voldemort dodging your spell or being hit by it. Do you understand why we are covering these topics first?"

"Yes, Professor." Seldom had a school lesson had such utter practical use in Harry's life.

"Good. Can you teach this same material to your students in the DA in the next few weeks?"

"Yes, sir, but you could do it better."

"Probably not Harry, but they believe in you, and sometimes that is everything. You're the leader Harry. If you ask them to, they'll follow you to the gates of Hell itself because they know that you'll do everything that you can to bring them back. You're a great leader Harry."

"Sir?" Harry knew that Flitwick had more to say and he waited patiently for him to continue.

"Normally your best play is to take away the enemy's ability to inflict damage to your side, then you pick them off." Harry nodded, understanding the concept.

"Sometimes the best play is not to lose, Harry, and sometimes you have to go for the throat. You'll know the difference." Harry knew that Flitwick was speaking from experience.

"Thank you, Professor."

Flitwick smiled and they shook hands.

... --- ...

Hermione had Defense class Tuesday morning. It was strange not taking the class with Harry or Ron. The instructor covered the Impedimenta jinx. Hermione recalled researching it in fourth year with Harry to help him in the third task. She recalled that he mentioned that he used it to get out of the graveyard and grab Cedric.

Suddenly it didn't seem like a waste of time and she practiced it a third time.

... --- ...

While Hermione was reviewing the Impediment jinx, Moody was working Harry much harder. They'd set up a dozen practice dummies and Harry had spent the day practicing blasting them at faster and faster speeds.

Finally Harry was able to effectively cast a spell wordlessly and his attack rate nearly doubled.

Moody nodded and reset the Auror training mannequins so they'd fire a stinging hex back at him. Harry made the mistake of mentioning that it wasn't much of a spell.

Moody replied, "Aye, but picture that it's the killing curse. At the end of an hour, I don't want to see you cut anywhere. To make it more interesting for ya, here's another dozen. It's over when you've been cut, or you've finished with em. In the meanwhile, I'll sit here and start on your lunch. He opened one of the bottles of butterbeer and began sipping on it. "Go." Suddenly the mannequins animated.

Harry transfigured several of the pieces of rock into much larger boulders that he could hide behind. The mannequins weren't especially good duelers, but they were quite mobile. Moody had tinkered with the wards so that Harry could apparate within the spacious room, just not in or out of it.

Slowly but steadily he took his shots. He got the number down to twenty, then eighteen then fifteen, then twelve, then nine, then three. Finally he got the last ones. Sweating profusely, he sat down at the table only to notice that Moody had eaten both of their lunches.

Moody nodded, and said, "Here, I saved you a butterbeer. What could you have done better?"

Harry thought for a moment and said, "I should have left. It was foolish to face twenty-four opponents to begin with."

Moody nodded and replied, "You must have been listening to Flitwick. Most of the Senior Aurors come back with some dribble about better technique or whatever. You found yourself in a situation where you had a low probability of surviving. The winning move would have been to find a way to get out. But since that option had been taken away from you, your remaining options were to find a way to call for help or take your time and carefully defend yourself. You did just fine."

"So why'd you eat my lunch?"

"Crikey, Potter, you've got two house elves. Order yourself two steaks if you want." They laughed at themselves.

Moody said, "Next time, you'll have to dodge em for an hour without your wand. Think about how you might be able to do it. I'll see you later."

"Thanks Moody." Exhausted, Harry went back to his room.

... --- ...

The first DA class completely amazed Harry. The sheer numbers of attendees were almost overwhelming. He looked into the sea of small faces and said, "Hi. I'm Harry Potter. This is the Defense Association. The purpose of tonight's drill is to sort you into what will be the Tuesday group and the Thursday group. The meetings will be mostly practical. We'll meet every other week on your day. A good part of the

meetings will be to teach some aspect of defense. That could be making a shield, using an object to block a spell, or increasing our agility.

Harry went and got a couple of buckets of tennis balls that he'd transfigured earlier. He said, "Everyone take two, spread out and sit down after you're got them. I'm going to show you some dodges for a few minutes then you'll have a chance to practice them. Seamus, toss one of those tennis balls at me, please."

From thirty feet Seamus pelted a ball that hit Harry in the chest.

"Ouch. OK do it again one at a time until I ask you to stop."

Seamus threw. Harry could see that the ball was going to miss and remained motionless. He threw again. Harry kept his feet where they were and leaned to the right as the ball sailed by. He threw again. Harry didn't move his feet, but quickly squatted down. Seamus threw again and missed. He threw again and Harry took a step to the left. He threw again and Harry flattened himself on the ground, glad to have set up the soft mats first.

Thanking Seamus, Harry asked, "Neville what did you see?"

Neville replied, "Half the time he was going to miss anyway. You didn't have to do anything those times."

Everyone laughed, but Harry said "Good point. We'll be spending a lot of time on spell accuracy." His best buddy was gone because of that very reason. "What else?"

Neville thought for a moment and said, "You're very quick, Harry. If you were facing him, I doubt that he could ever hit you."

Harry thought, 'No one is lucky forever.' A moment later he said, "OK, Let's try again."

Seamus started tossing tennis balls at Harry who was concentrating on dodging them. Hermione picked up one of the balls, got behind

Harry and tossed it, hitting him square in the back. There was silence for a moment then someone said, "She cheated."

Harry smiled at the fifth year witch and replied, "Hermione didn't cheat. I'd asked her to do it earlier. The bad guys don't play fair, so you have to do the best that you can. I'd like you to pair up now and have you toss the balls at your partner from about twenty feet away. Dodge if you can."

Harry had set the room up in advance so that it had one big soft floor like a gigantic gym mat so no one would get hurt from rolling around.

As they started tossing the balls back and forth Hermione went around marking people's names on her list with either a one or a two depending on how well they did. After 25 minutes, Harry had them stop and sit down. Dobby and Winky passed around trays with glasses of iced pumpkin juice. Hermione went around and told the people that they were in either the Tuesday group or the Thursday group.

Harry ended the meeting saying, "Everyone got better. If you're in the Tuesday group, we'll meet two weeks from tonight. If you're in the Thursday group, we'll meet two weeks from Thursday."

When Harry had dismissed everyone, Moody appeared saying, "Good job, Potter. The little ones don't know a lot of spells but they might be able to dodge and run away. What are you going to do next week for the older ones?"

Harry replied, "The same thing to start with. It's a good sorting exercise."

Moody nodded and gave the closest thing to a smile that Harry had ever seen him make. "You're right. It's a good way of passing on what you're working on too. Goodnight, Potter."

... --- ...

Bill's lessons couldn't have been any more different from Moody's. He began explaining the concept of wealth and the concept of income.

He was good at teaching Harry the concepts because he tended to use examples that were within Harry's grasp. "Let's talk about Fred and George's joke shop. How does it work?"

Harry replied, "They sell stuff."

"Right. Where do they get the stuff to sell?"

"They either buy it from somebody and resell it, or they make the stuff out of something else." Harry thought this business stuff seemed easy

"Right. So they have raw materials. They apply labor, and end up with finished saleable inventory. How do they make any gold?"

Harry replied, "By selling lots of stuff?"

"Mostly. They make a profit by selling stuff for more than it cost them to make or buy it."

"OK. That's good."

Bill nodded and replied, "Right. Now suppose that they wanted to open up a second shop. What would they need?"

"They would need gold for rent, inventory and employees."

"OK. How would George know if the other building was doing OK?"

"If it was bringing him gold?" Harry wasn't sure of his answer, but it made sense.

"OK. There are some different ways to measure that. One way would be the percent of the sales revenue that was profit after the expenses. In other words if on average they earned five galleons every time they sold a hundred galleons of product their average percentage of revenue profit would be five percent."

Harry's eyes hadn't glazed over yet, but the potential was there.

Bill continued. "Another way of looking at it would be to measure how much they had invested in the new business and how much it earned in profit. Say they invested a thousand galleons."

"Right," said Harry, smiling.

"At the end of the year, the business had made a hundred galleons."

"I get it, the profit divided by the original investment. Does that mean they'd get a hundred galleons back?"

"Possibly, but they might choose to invest the gold in additional inventory rather than take the gold for themselves. OK we'll continue this next time."

"Thanks Bill."

"I should be the one thanking you Harry, but you're welcome. I'll see you later." Bill smiled at the irony of the young man who had tripled his salary. Harry had gotten him one of the best jobs at Gringotts and was thanking him for doing his job.

... --- ...

Minister Abraxan, John Thomas and half of the ministry had descended on Hogwarts on Saturday evening. It was an opportunity to celebrate a win within the wizarding world war and everyone wanted in on it.

McGonagall had mixed feelings about the pomp and hoopla that was being made, knowing that while the recognition was deserved, at least one of the recipients would rather face a troll than be the focus of such a gathering.

Flitwick had vanished the long tables and conjured seating for over a thousand. Between the students, a few parents, the Aurors, reporters and ministry people every spot had been taken. Abraxan began.

“Good evening. We are gathered here this evening to recognize the contributions of three individuals who collectively helped save over a thousand lives during the attack at Hogsmeade this summer.”

Harry thought that she seemed to go on forever. He was certainly glad that Moody and Alyx had been recognized, but they hadn't been the only ones there. Certainly Remus had done as much as Moody and he hadn't even been mentioned.

Finally she finished and presented them with the awards. She asked them to say something, and Alyx and Moody looked to Harry to speak for them. He walked to the podium with the magical microphone and began. “We didn't fight alone that evening. We hadn't intended to fight at all. We'd just gone to the pub to have a pint.” There was a bit of laughter from the crowd. “We didn't go looking for trouble. Trouble found us, and like the rest of the people who were there that night, we did our best. Professor Dumbledore used to talk about doing what was right rather than what was easy. All of us who were there that night had the opportunity to put those words to the test.”

Harry continued. “We couldn't save everyone that night, and we didn't finish the war, but I personally watched Cadet Alyx do her best, as I saw Remus Lupin, Alastor Moody and others. I'm sorry that we couldn't have saved more people and I'm sorry that we didn't finish off the enemy, but the men, women and children who were there fought with valor. I'm proud to say that I was with them helping as I could.”

Harry looked at Alyx and Moody to see if they wanted to say anything, but they both shook their heads. He had said all that was needed.

Afterwards there was a reception. Minerva, Flitwick, Hagrid, Slughorn and a whole host of Ministry officials came up and congratulated them. After a few minutes Harry saw Hermione along with her parents. Hermione and Emma hugged Harry, and Dan congratulated him.

There were a number of photographers there and Harry, Alyx and Moody were dragged off to have their pictures taken.

A few minutes later Emma saw Harry trying to return to them, but a lot of people wanted to visit with him, even if briefly.

“Who are the muggles over there by Hermione and that Auror with the pink hair?” asked Seamus to Dean. He was fairly loud, apparently having had too many butterbeers, and wasn’t paying attention to the Daily Prophet reporter standing nearby.

“He’s no ordinary muggle,” boasted Dean. He killed Bellatrix Lestrange with a handgun. The bloody sot hit her right in the head and mostly blew it off. I saw it myself at Ron’s brother’s wedding. That’s Hermione’s dad.”

‘Oh shit,’ thought Emma. She went to get Tonks and tell her, but by the time she reached her in the crowded room the teens and the reporter had gone.

... --- ...

After an early breakfast Sunday their men had snuck off to the room of requirement for a round of golf so Emma and Hermione got to spend some quality time together. As Emma followed her daughter through the school corridors she looked around with wide eyes. Hermione caught the look on her mother’s face and grinned at her.

“Amazing,” Emma declared.

“Magic,” Hermione corrected.

They both laughed. Hermione pointed out things about the castle as they walked. She showed her the third floor corridor where Fluffy had been housed that Harry was now using, Myrtle’s bathroom, the loo where Hermione had met the troll and the hospital wing. After their conversation with Madame Pomfrey was cut short by a couple third years belching up slugs they started towards Gryffindor tower.

“What’s on your mind?” Emma asked as she noted that Hermione’s mood seemed to take a nose dive. Hermione smiled weakly.

“Second year, the first time Draco Malfoy called me a mudblood to my face, Ron used that slug hex on him. Well, he tried anyway. It backfired.”

“Poor Ron! It was good of him to stand up for you. You miss him a lot don’t you?”

Hermione nodded. “He was one my of best friends. We argued and got on each other’s nerves a lot. But he... He was always there. Always had my back.”

They pondered that as she led her mother through the place she had called home for six years. Hermione introduced her mum to a few of the people who were hanging around the common room. The ones that had been at Harry’s birthday party all said hello.

In Gryffindor tower, the seventh year girls’ dorm sat vacant.

Lavender was sleeping in what would have been Ginny’s sixth year bed. She was also acting as an older sister and mentor to the sixth year girls. They had been devastated by Ginny’s death.

They found Lavender sitting with two of her dorm mates helping them with their divinations homework. A third was nearby reading her potions book. Hermione gave Lavender a soft squeeze on the shoulder. Lavender smiled at her and then went back to the tarot cards.

“How about a reading Mrs. Granger?” Lavender asked with an easy smile. Emma smiled back and looked at Hermione with an unspoken question.

“Go for it, Mum, they can’t be past the fourth hole yet.”

“Hole?” Lavender asked in confusion.

“Golf?” The holder of the potions book assumed.

“Golf,” Emma agreed. The book didn’t move but the reader snorted a laugh.

Lavender helped sixth year Erin Erickson with the card reading. They talked about love, happiness and health. All were pretty positive. Then they moved on to family. Apparently Emma was going to have two kids sometime in the next five years. Twins Erin predicted.

"As long as they are not Fred and George," Emma quipped.

"They may not be yours. But you'll have two small children in your life soon," Lavender informed her. She smirked at Hermione who rolled her eyes.

"What a bunch of rubbish," came Wendy Williams' voice from behind the potions book again.

"Merlin, Wendy, are you sure Hermione's not your sister?" Lavender asked, teasing her. Wendy lowered the book. She looked at Emma and winked.

"You know, Lavender, muggles don't all look alike. My Mum's a muggle, but that's not her. This one's a lot taller" Wendy replied. The pure blood witch frowned thinking that she had been insulted, but wasn't sure how. Wendy really could have been Hermione's sister in attitude and sarcasm. Not to mention intelligence. Hermione swallowed her smirk and made to leave before it got ugly. Lavender had her hands full with the Williams girl.

Emma thanked them for the reading and followed her daughter out the portrait hole. They made their way to the visitor quarters that Hermione shared with Harry and sat down on one of the love seats.

Emma had been contemplating for a couple days of a way to approach the conversation they needed to have. She remembered how defensive Hermione had gotten at the dinner table and didn't want the conversation to be heated, but it needed to be said.

"Just spit it out Mum," Hermione told her. Emma frowned a bit but Hermione shrugged, "You've been wanting to talk to me about something since last night."

"I don't want to put you on the defensive and start an argument, Hermione."

"But?" Her daughter asked.

"But what in the Hell were you thinking trying to get to Hogsmeade when it was under attack?" 'Well, nothing to get defensive about in that question,' Hermione thought unpleasantly.

"I was thinking that the only person, still alive, that I loved in the wizarding world was in unspeakable danger and I had to go protect him," she answered honestly.

"You're not a warrior. Not a fighter," Emma told her.

"I know Mum," said Hermione, disappointed in herself more than anything.

"And you'd do it again, wouldn't you?" Emma asked. Hermione didn't answer right away. She couldn't look at her mother. She didn't want to scare her. Well, scare her more. But she couldn't bring herself to lie.

"Yes, I probably would," she confessed.

"You've always pushed yourself past your limits. Usually it's in your schoolwork. But this isn't about getting the best grade or learning a subject three years before it is taught to you," Emma stated in a unyielding tone of voice.

"I know Mum."

"Do you? Do you really?"

"Yes, Mother, I do know. You have no idea how well I know it. I've been living in this world for a third of my life. On my very first ride on the Hogwarts Express Pansy Parkinson called me a filthy mudblood. I didn't know what mudblood meant until Ron explained it after the slug incident over a year later. I knew it wasn't good but I, the queen of questions, was afraid to ask. You have absolutely no idea what I put

up with daily. I would love to tell you it's only select students that were destined to become Death Eaters, but it isn't. Snape was not the only professor with an attitude of pure blood superiority. A couple others are nearly as bad, but not as blatant."

"I hadn't been here a full day this year and I overheard a one of my classmates tell another that they were sickened that a mudblood was head girl... That the only reason I made head girl was because I was McGonagall's favorite little Gryffindor. Never mind that I've spent six years working for my goals. I'm still just a filthy little mudblood."

"Don't say that," Emma whispered.

"Why not? It's true. I've thought about getting it tattooed on my bum," Hermione said angrily.

"There is nothing dirty about you," Emma snapped.

"Filthy Mum, not dirty. Filthy is the epithet of choice. Merlin knows I have heard it enough to know."

Emma's arms were beginning to tremble. She wasn't sure if she was angry with the horrible people, no they were not people, or the way her daughter was sarcastically talking about it. Hermione reached for her mother's hands.

"Then why did you stay? You could have come home and gone to a muggle school," Emma told her.

"I know. But as bad as it is sometimes it's... It's who I am Mum. I'm a witch. When I'm in this world I feel alive... But I have to push myself to be the best, to prove myself, just to be average in the eyes of some people."

"Because of your father and me?" Emma asked with a lump in her throat.

"Oh for Merlin's sake Mum. I don't blame you. I don't think any less of you and Dad because you're nonmagical. I love you. I wouldn't be half the person I am without you."

“Why fight? You don’t have to Hermione,” Emma said almost in desperation.

“Yes, I do. It’s not just me, Mum. What about my kids? I could marry a muggle and have ten kids. Chances are they would be magical. How would they be treated? Would they have to put up with the attitudes that I do? What if I married a nice pure blood boy? Maybe one of the Weasley boys. Think the kids of a blood traitor and a mudblood would have much opportunity in the wizarding old-boys club? The world is so Victorian.”

“I don’t understand. If it is so bad and so dangerous then why stay?”

“I told you. It’s who I am. I have a chance to make the wizarding world better for everyone. I have to do it Mum. It’s not as bad as it sounds. Only one person in Gryffindor house has ever shown that type of attitude. The Ravenclaw’s dislike me because I am smart, not because of my bloodlines. I was so used to that from muggle primary school that it’s never fazed me a bit.”

Hermione paused a moment. Emma had stopped trembling. She tightened her grip on her mother’s hands.

“You and Dad taught me to stand up for what I feel is right. Remember when I got beat up during primary school for standing up for that African girl? I would do it again. I can make a difference in this world.” Hermione was firm. She would have too even though the girl had avoided her like she had the plague and occasionally taunted her like the other kids.

“We’re not talking about a school yard fight. We are talking about a war. I want you to live long enough to have kids to worry about. But you need to know your limitations. There is nothing wrong with research and being on the back lines treating injuries. You don’t have to be on the front line to make a difference.”

“I know Mum. Really I do. But Harry is my best friend. If you knew someone was trying to kill Dad and you could protect him would you?”

"Of course I would," Emma answered immediately.

"If you could only hope to try to protect him, would you?"

"I see your point. But Harry has a lot of people protecting him."

"But they aren't... me. They..." Hermione hesitated. Then she continued softly, "They don't love him like I do." She was doing her best to hold back the tears that had welled in her eyes.

"I understand protecting the people you love, Hermione. Why do you think we're having this conversation? Harry said he wouldn't have a problem with you joining them in battle if you were really prepared. I would have a huge problem with it. I have an even larger one since you're not prepared. I'm your mother. I don't ever want to see you put yourself in danger," Emma said vehemently.

"Mum... I can't promise that I will never be in danger. But I won't run headfirst into a fight that I can't handle. I promise," Hermione told her solemnly. Emma searched her daughter's eyes for more reassurance.

"Do you know what you can handle?" Emma inquired.

"No. But Harry does. I trust his judgement. He wouldn't put me in a position that I'm not ready for. He also wouldn't hold me back just because I'm his girlfriend," Hermione told her.

"Please, Hermione. Please try to stay safe. I understand your point of view. I honestly do. But can you understand mine?"

"I can try," Hermione assured as best as she could.

"This is awful of me. Molly Weasley has lost three of her children. But she still has four more. I know that brings her no comfort but if I lost you I don't think I could survive."

Hermione hugged her Mum hard and didn't let go for a long time. Emma knew that she had to trust both her daughter and Harry. She

didn't like it. More and more she wanted to steal her daughter from the wizarding world and hide her until the war was over.

"While we are having this nice little chat," Emma said with a sniff pulling back. Hermione conjured some tissue for them both. Then Emma continued, "Are you and Harry having sex?"

"MUM!" Emma wanted to laugh at the injured expression on her daughters face.

"Come on, now. It's a valid question. Your father told me he caught Harry in your room last week," Emma said.

"Did Dad mention that we were fully clothed? On the love seat? Or that the door was wide open?"

"As a matter of fact, yes he did. That's a nice avoidance technique you have there. And don't think I didn't notice you didn't answer my question," Emma chided. Hermione sighed.

"Did you know that Harry and I heard you and Dad that same night?" She sounded dismayed.

"And there's more avoidance. No, I didn't know. But your father and I have been married..." She stopped when Hermione rolled her eyes. "What?"

"Oh please, that has been your excuse for years. Mum, do you know how embarrassing it is to hear your parents uh..." Hermione's face was burning. She was a little put off that Emma seemed so amused.

"Sex Hermione. It's called sex. We had a very long discussion about it when you were eleven," Emma noted. Hermione shuddered.

"I remember. Really, Mum, I remember every word. We don't have to have it again," Hermione conveyed, completely embarrassed.

"I think we do. When you were eleven it was a possibility in the future. Now you're 17, a legal adult in your world, and for all intents living with your boyfriend. I'm concerned. Those children we were talking

about earlier don't need to be born in the next year or two," Emma told her.

"Of course not. I know about protection," Hermione said gulping slightly. 'Merlin help me, not the birth control speech,' Hermione begged silently.

"Tell me about magical protection," Emma suggested. Hermione almost groaned out loud.

"There is a contraceptive spell. It's not very effective. 85 tops. Actually there are several spells to make sure you conceive. It's all that purebloods have to have a son to pass my name on to rubbish," Hermione informed her. Emma nodded and Hermione sighed again. There was no way she was getting out of the conversation. She continued, "There is also a potion. It is about as effective as the spell. The two used together nullify the effects of each other."

"And muggle methods?" Emma posed the question in a serious tone.

"Muggle birth control is much better. The pill has the same effectiveness on a witch as a muggle. Condoms do what they are supposed to in regard to pregnancy."

"And disease?" Emma asked. Sometimes Hermione could forget that her mother was a medical professional. This was not one of those times. She knew about some of the magical sexually transmitted diseases. They were all curable. That didn't make them any less nasty. As a witch the muggle STD's had no effect on her body. She told her mother all of this.

"I don't know if a condom would block a magical disease. I would have to check with Madame Pomfrey," Hermione admitted quietly.

"Will you?"

Hermione was getting irritated. "Since Harry and I are both virgins, it's not exactly something we need to worry that much about," she snapped.

“Are?”

“Yes, are. Satisfied?”

“Now was that so hard to tell me?” Emma asked.

“You believe me?” Hermione asked in surprise.

“Of course I do. You only lie if you have a good reason. Lying about having sex is not a good reason. You know I’ve always been here for you if you need me no matter how embarrassed you get. I’m not trying to embarrass you Hermione. I just need to know that you are aware of your options. Of course, I think abstinence is the best option, but you’re seventeen, not seven and I live in reality.”

Hermione sighed again, “Harry...” She hesitated not sure if she was ready to admit the truth to her mother.

“He’s not pushing you is he?” Emma inquired quite surprised.

“No.” Hermione sighed again. “If anyone is pushing it’s me. I think he’s unclear in his feelings for me. It’s all new, I mean yeah we hug and kiss a lot... and um... other things. We haven’t told any of the other students... But sometimes I wonder if he’s just comparing me to Ginny or Alyx physically and counting the ways that I don’t measure up.”

Emma knew that Hermione had some deep-rooted self-esteem issues. Growing up as a brilliant child who was different was not easy. Being considered different in the wizarding world didn’t help. Emma had so hoped for Hermione to find her place after finding out how special her daughter really was. It hurt to hear how deeply seated the prejudicial issues were. She had never seen Harry together with Ginny, but she had seen how he looked at Hermione. She thought that Hermione was selling herself short.

“I don’t believe Harry’s that kind of man, Hermione. If he is then you don’t want him. I never saw him together with Ginny, but I know that he doesn’t go around ogling Alyx. From what you’ve told me about your schedules, you barely have time to have a meal together. I can’t

see Harry talking with that Mr. Moody about his new girlfriend. Lord, that man is intimidating. You need to have this discussion with Harry not me.”

“You’re right. I’m not sure I want to know though. I’m not Ginny. I just want him to love me for me.”

“Neither of you would be happy living a lie. You know that. If you need another girl to talk with, I’m sure that Alyx could use a friend.”

Hermione did know. She wasn’t sure Harry would ever be able to completely give himself emotionally. He had been too abused as a child and now was under a crushing level of responsibility. But she loved him and was willing to work with him.

Emma embarrassed Hermione one more time by giving her a box of condoms. Hermione quickly put them away in her room and then sat back down. Emma slid behind her and wrapped her arms around her. Hermione leaned back and just let her Mum hold her like she had when she was a small child. They talked about lighter subjects.

That was how Dan and Harry found them - Mother and daughter talking and laughing.

Content.

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As the men sat down Emma asked, “Did you have fun hitting balls?”

“It was nothing like that, Em,” said Dan excitedly. “It was raining too hard so we had to cancel our tee time at the club. Harry set up a room in the castle so it was exactly like the Phoenix nine that we usually play on, complete with grass, trees, bunkers and even live geese! There was a set of clubs there just like mine and another one just like his! The only difference was that there wasn’t a group in front of us to slow the play. It was bloody brilliant!”

Emma had no frame of reference, but Hermione knew that her father had described quite a feat of magic. Emma, happy to see her best friend so excited, simply asked, "Did you enjoy your day?"

"Yes," replied Dan. "I asked Harry if we could join his Order in some capacity."

Suddenly Emma wished that they'd spent their morning comparing their stiff shafts or whatever they'd been talking about during the summer holiday.

Harry asked evenly, "Is that something that you want to do?" He didn't want to discourage her, but he didn't want to coerce her either.

Emma knew that the question had been directed at her. Suddenly she had feelings of inadequacy. She said, "Harry, I'm not a natural fighter, and I can't conjure a golf course out of thin air, but we'll do what we can to help you and Hermione. How can we help?"

"For now, please keep watching all of the newspapers for any attacks or odd things happening. I'll have a better idea next weekend."

"There's something else we should talk about," said Emma to Dan. "I heard one of the students mention you in relation to that witch who..."

Dan interrupted. "They tried to kill us and burn us out just because of who we are. Now they have a reason to be nervous. We're living in a magically hidden house. What else can we do?"

Emma knew that he was right, but a part of her wished that they were having brunch after church rather than being a set of targeted parents visiting a magical castle. She asked, "When's the next Order meeting?"

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The next morning, Snape approached his master cautiously. He really did not want this job. The Dark Lord had been in a terrible mood since he discovered that the dementors had deserted their noble cause.

"What is it Severus?" The dark lord snapped impatiently. He could see without looking into the potion master's mind that the news he was about to receive would not be good.

"Master, I have identified Bella's killer," Snape said in a shaky voice. He knew that two things were going to happen.

"Well?" Voldemort demanded when Snape did not continue speaking.

"It was the mudblood Granger..."

"A mudblood killed Bella?" Riddle interrupted rising to his feet.

"No master. Not the mudblood witch. Her father." Snape trembled while on his knees. Why hadn't he put Draco under the imperious curse and made him do this?

The window cracked then shattered. "A muggle? A muggle? Tell me this is a sick joke."

"I'm sorry my Lord. The Prophet reported that he 'snot her in the head with a hand gum'," Snape said trembling even harder

Riddle felt the hatred he held for muggles increase ten fold. Snape's bladder released itself after the Dark Lord stormed past him without stopping to torture him.

Lord Voldemort apparated with a crack that would have made the Weasley twins proud. He glared at the empty burnt out lot that once held the Granger's filthy muggle house. With the wave of his wand he left an unmistakable message. The sidewalk cracked into pebbles when he apparated away.

Five minutes later Tonks, checking to see who had apparated in the muggle neighborhood, tripped under her invisibility cloak. As she got up she saw flames forming words.

Bella will be avenged.

Tonks apparated directly to #12.

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Please leave a lengthy review. That's how we get better.

Chapter 18

The second week of school turned out to be just as busy as the first, but with the addition of an Order meeting on Wednesday. Harry was frustrated. He was spending almost no time with Hermione, homework was piling up, he was besieged by owls, the DA was taking a lot of his time, he was physically sore from Moody's lessons and the Cadets had asked him to spar with them on Monday evenings. So much for Monday and Tuesday.

The Tuesday evening DA meeting was half again as large as the previous week. Abraxan had said a lot of things at the award presentation on Saturday – youngest Order of Merlin first class recipient, outstanding bravery and extraordinary skill to name a few. Since the hard core junior Death Eaters had been expunged from the castle, quite a few of the younger Slytherins had given consideration to joining and many went for the first meeting.

Harry again did the tennis ball exercise. There was less grumbling than Harry would have expected from the older students. Justin Finch-Fletchley muttered something about the exercise being a waste of time and Harry heard him. It was the wrong thing to have said. After they were done, Harry lined a dozen of older Hufflepuff girls up at one end of the room. He stood about fifteen feet in front of the witches and asked Justin to stand twenty feet in front of him. Harry asked, "Justin do you think you can hit me from here firing red sparks?"

Justin said, "Sure I can, Potter. No problem."

Harry nodded and said, "Of course. Go ahead and try."

Justin fired and missed, hitting Susan Bones instead. Harry said, "Please lay on the mat, Susan. Go ahead Justin, try again." Justin fired. Harry dodged to the right and Eleanor Branstone was hit. Without being told, she laid joined Susan on the mat, giggling. "Try again." Justin fired three times in quick succession. Harry managed to dodge all three, but Megan Jones and Laura Madley were hit. They joined the other two on the mat. Harry turned to the group and asked, "What just happened?"

Alyx replied, "Justin missed his target and most likely injured or killed four of his friends. At a minimum, his wand would be snapped. Seeing as he doesn't have a famous hero for a best friend, most likely he bought a ticket for a long stay in Azkaban, assuming his intended target didn't ease him out of the world first." She had been watching him with interest.

There was a bit of laughter, but Harry wasn't laughing. "We all need practice. We'll practice fundamental kind of stuff like hitting what you're aiming at as well as plenty of advanced stuff. Learning to get out of the way of a tennis ball is just as effective as learning to get out of the way of a cutting hex, except Madam Pomfrey won't have to treat 160 patients tonight."

They repeated the exercise with the tennis balls and this time everyone took it a bit more seriously. Harry had made his point with Justin without beating it to death and his friendly fire victims each embarrassed the teen by giving him loud wet kisses on the cheek. Hermione did well with the exercise herself, as it was something that she had practiced over the summer with Alyx.

Alyx and the other cadets did the ratings. Towards the end of the session she pulled Justin aside and said, "There are a lot of Aurors out there who wish that they were better at the very two things that Harry had you practice tonight. He volunteered his evening teaching something that could save your life or the life of one of your friends someday. Take it for the gift that it is." She squeezed his arm gently, winked and said, "Besides, you got kisses from four pretty girls tonight."

Justin nodded, smiled back and said, "Thanks."

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Hermione quickly finished her breakfast. She needed to read an extra chapter in her transfiguration book before class at ten. While Professor McGonagall was not as strict as in previous years, Hermione saw no reason to slack off.

She had just finished the third page when the Daily Prophet was delivered. She decided to take a quick look at the paper before finishing her homework.

Muggle Kills Lestrangle, the headline read.

Hermione read the article slowly not believing her eyes at first. She realized the consequences immediately. She read it a second time taking in the details. Saturday night at the awards ceremony... Unnamed seventh year Hogwarts student... Daniel Granger, muggle father of seventh year student Hermione Granger... She closed her eyes briefly.

A few seconds later every plate within thirty feet of Hermione shattered. She left the great hall to find Harry. She would have been horrified to learn that her reaction was so similar to that of Tom Riddle.

At the head table, the headmistress watched with some concern as her favorite student stormed from the hall.

... --- ...

Hermione scribbled on the parchment that was sitting next to her dinner plate. After years of practice she was able to tune out the noise of her classmates and concentrate. But it wasn't schoolwork that she was working on. She was trying to get the last of her thoughts down before the meeting of the research team that was scheduled for just after dinner.

When she finally finished writing, she charmed the parchment so that only she could read it. Across the table Seamus snorted a laugh.

"Aw, come on Hermione. No one's going to steal your homework," he told her as he grabbed for the parchment. She scowled at him and quickly put it away.

"Who said it was homework?" she snapped, picking up her fork.

"A love letter then? Ooooh, who's the lucky bloke?" Seamus asked in a loud voice.

She just glared at him and began to eat her cold dinner. Seamus and Dean laughed and started teasing her in loud voices. They reminded Hermione of Ron and Harry at age eleven. She ate quietly just listening to them speculate on who the boy could be. When they got no response, they quieted down a bit.

“Did you know,” she began in a light conversational tone. Then she continued speaking her voice getting harder with each word, “That the students who told the Daily Prophet about my father killing Lestrage have been identified?”

The upper class students at the Gryffindor table fell stone silent. Everyone knew about Voldemort’s hundred thousand Galleon reward to anyone who delivered her father to him alive thanks to a follow up article in the Prophet. Her reaction to the original article was already becoming Hogwarts legend.

Dean swallowed hard and Seamus turned purple from not breathing. The silence spread from their table around the hall.

“You really should keep your voices down,” she finally said. She grabbed her pack as she stood and left the room. As the doors closed behind her the silence ended and an explosion of speculation began. Neville followed Hermione quietly.

“Hi, Hermione,” he said as he caught up with her.

“Hi, Neville,” she replied still walking with a purpose.

“You okay?” He asked as they approached tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy. She didn’t answer right away. She paced three times and the door appeared.

He followed her inside, noting that the room was decidedly muggle. She sighed loudly.

“I’m fine Neville. Thanks for asking,” she told him placing her pack on the table. With the exception of the large table, the room looked exactly like the dining room that had been in the house in Crawly.

"I've been wanting to tell you..." he hesitated, and steeled himself. "I wanted you to know that I think your Dad's a hero."

She didn't know what to say. Neville gave her a quick pat on the back and left before the silence got any heavier.

After a few minutes of thought Hermione went back into the hall and set up some wards that would tell her when someone approached. She then sat down at the table and began to pull things out her pack.

She expanded the Pensieve and carefully put Harry's memory into it. She checked to make sure she had the right one. They had removed more than one memory each to study.

She opened her potions text and started to read hoping to distract herself. It didn't work and she was relieved when the others began to trickle in.

Susan, Luna and Padma arrived first, which made sense as they were already in the castle. Flitwick, Sprout and Poppy followed soon afterward. Arabella arrived with Molly and Alyx. Alyx, while not part of the research group, had agreed to sit in on the meeting. Hermione knew that Alyx was going to be a brilliant investigator once she graduated. She had a great eye for detail. Hermione waved the door shut and sealed it knowing that Tom and Diggle were both working on other things.

One of the endless house elves brought them tea and biscuits.

"I am quite impressed by the way you handled Mr. Thomas and Mr. Finnegan," Professor Flitwick told Hermione who nodded and shrugged. She didn't want to discuss it. She had been thinking of ways to hex them since viewing her mother's memory of their idiocy.

She began by reviewing the search for the Horcruxes.

"Okay. We have identified five of what we believe are the six Horcruxes," she said. She waved her wand and a muggle wipe off

board appeared behind her. She waved it again and a green marker began to write.

1 - Diary - Destroyed

2 - Ring - Destroyed

3 - Locket - Found

4 - Cup - Found

5 - Nagini

6 – Unknown

“I gave Remus the list of items that we came up with that belonged to the founders. The search team has found almost all of them. Most of them were in private collections and none of them were made into a Horcrux. We are left with five items that they have not yet found.” She motioned for Padma.

“Rowena Ravenclaw had a bit of an artistic streak in her. The search team had found everything of hers except for her mason and wood chisels. They were stolen from the ministry over a hundred years ago. I suspect that an artist made off with them and they will not be located until that person dies,” Padma told them.

Then Hermione motioned to Molly, “Helga Hufflepuff had an anvil that her father crafted swords on. The only thing we know about it is that was once owned by the Rivoire family. Apparently was taken by Apollos Rivoire when he left the family. I found no mention of him after 1715,” Molly said.

“Do we know where he went?” Susan asked.

“The history of Pure Blood Wizarding Society for that year states that his family ‘sent him off’ to the new world,” Molly replied. She looked a little lost. “I assumed that meant America. I checked the American Who’s New and Who Knew as far back as 1790 and found no mention of the name Rivoire.”

"Was Apollos Rivoire a wizard or a squib?" Sprout asked. She saw Hermione's confusion. "It would have been very unusual for a wizarding family to send a son to the Colonies that early. European magical people didn't start populating North America until after the muggles revolted against the monarchy in the late 1700's."

"Unusual, but not unheard of. There was a lot of money to be made if you had the right trade. I assume Rivoire was a smith of some sort?" Arabella asked obviously thinking about the use of the anvil.

"A gold and silversmith," Molly answered.

"Maybe he changed his name," Alyx suggested. The pure bloods at the table looked horrified. She hastily explained, "There was a war in America during the 1750's and 60's. It's called the French and Indian war by American muggles. British settlers fought the French and the Indians for basically everything east of the Mississippi River. The British won," Alyx said with a shrug.

"Maybe he did change his name. If so, we'll never find the family," Poppy told them. Then she added, "Neither would You-Know-Who."

"That leaves us with Hufflepuff's diamond bracelet and Ravenclaw's sapphire ring," Hermione told them.

"Or an artifact we don't know about," Luna said in her spaced out voice. Hermione agreed with her and then asked, "Are there any archives or libraries that we haven't searched for information?"

Arabella, who was a student of history, replied. She told them how she and Diggle had visited every magical library on the continent and then in Asia and Africa. It sounded like the trip of a lifetime to Hermione. Unfortunately the further they got from Britain, the less information they found on the founders.

"There are also archives at the Ministry of Magic that we have been searching furtively as we do not know who to trust there. Professor Dumbledore would have had access to that information. I don't like

assuming but I would have to think that he would have already searched it.”

“I have to agree,” Hermione said. She made a couple notes.

Then they discussed the American schools. Flitwick informed them that the transfiguration teacher professor at the Salem’s Witches’ Institute was a former Hogwarts student. He suggested that Hermione ask Minerva about her.

Hermione was shocked when Alyx told her that the American Institute of Magic used computers and was even on the Internet. She offered to get a log on and password from a friend of hers. Hermione agreed reminding Alyx to not mention what they were for.

“A what?” Susan asked, voicing the question of everyone else in the room.

“I’ll show you my computer later,” replied Hermione. “I’m sorry that we got on a different subject. I actually asked you to come tonight so we can view a memory. I thought that if we got a look at Tom Riddle maybe it would give us some ideas or a fresh perspective.”

Hermione reviewed briefly with them the events of Tom Riddle taking a job at Borgin and Burkes, Hepzibah Smith, the locket and the Hufflepuff cup. She told them about Hokey the house elf and how Riddle had vanished soon after the murder of Smith.

“Ten years later he reappeared,” she told them. She stopped for a few seconds made a note on her parchment and then continued, “He was not unrecognizable as Tom Riddle but had not yet become what we know as Voldemort.”

Everyone sat up a little straighter in their seat. She tapped the edge of the Pensieve and an image of Harry and Dumbledore watching Dumbledore and Tom Riddle appeared.

“Good evening, Tom,” Dumbledore said easily. “Won’t you sit down?”

They watched as Dumbledore retrieved wine for Tom and himself and exchanged pleasantries. Molly gasped when Dumbledore refused to use the name Voldemort instead opting to call him Tom. Hermione thought she was going to have to enervate everyone in the room when Dumbledore told Riddle he was 'woefully ignorant' of some types of magic. She had almost the same reaction the first time she had viewed the memory.

The look of rage and evil that took over Tom Riddle's face showed them all what he had become. Tom's challenge to let him learn the magic while teaching at Hogwarts caused most of them to flinch. It hit close to home as they thought about Severus Snape.

They watched as Dumbledore asked about Death Eaters, making notes of the names that Dumbledore seemingly pulled out of the air and smiling at his mention of the local barmen. Then Dumbledore confronted Riddle on not really wanting the job.

Half of the research team saw Riddle consider his wand. All were relieved when Tom left the room and the memory ended.

"Why?" Alyx asked.

"I know that didn't tell us anything about the Horcruxes, but it did say a lot about Riddle," Hermione commented a bit crankily. She knew that she was grasping at straws but didn't want to be reminded of it.

Alyx shook her head and replied, "No, I mean, why did he want to come back here if he didn't really want the job?"

"To teach children his noble cause," Sprout answered sarcastically.

"No. Professor Dumbledore would have never allowed it," Alyx said, rubbing her tattoos as if they could give her the answer.

"He allowed Snape to do it," Luna pointed out as if she had not been in his class for five years. No one had an answer for that.

After a minute of contemplation Hermione snatched her wand up quickly startling the rest of the group. She put her wand to her head

and pulled out a memory and then another. Then she turned to the wipe off board. With a wave of her wand the list of Horcruxes disappeared and the red marker began to write.

The others watched silently as Hermione focused on the board. After she was satisfied she went to start the Pensieve and then hesitated. She looked Molly in the eye and the red headed woman seemed to understand. Molly looked on as the Pensieve revealed two of her dead children and the one that was lost in the muggle world.

The great hall was filled with children in pajamas. Percy was bragging up Ron and more or less Harry very loudly. Ginny was sitting between her parents a little way down the table. Hermione, Harry and Ron sat off by themselves talking. Having just been un-petrified she wanted to know everything.

“He framed Hagrid for Myrtle’s murder. He told me that Dumbledore kept an annoyingly close eye on him after that. He couldn’t get back into the Chamber while he was in school,” Harry was saying.

“So he made the diary so that he could control someone else into doing his dirty work?” Hermione asked. Harry nodded and she continued, “And Lucius Malfoy gave it to Ginny. How nasty do you have to be to do that?”

The memory ended. She hastily tapped the Pensieve again. This time she saw the living room from the burnt down house in Crawley.

Emma said, “Harry you mentioned that Riddle came back shortly after he had finished at Hogwarts and had asked for a job. Does anything seem odd about that?”

Harry thought long and hard, trying to recall the different conversations that he’d had with the headmaster. After a few minutes one came to mind. “I remember talking to Riddle when I was in my second year. He said that Dumbledore began keeping an eye on him and, he wasn’t able to get back into the Chamber of Secrets.”

Hermione nodded, and replied, “Maybe that’s why he wanted to come back to the castle, to be able to go back and retrieve something that he’d left there.”

The second short memory ended.

They all looked at the wipe off board.

TM Riddle

1926 – December 31 b.

1938 – Began Hogwarts

1943 – Learns about Horcruxes

1943 – late spring - Opens Chamber of Secrets

1943 – Murders Myrtle

1943 – Kills Riddle Sr. and Paternal grandparents

1943 – Creates diary

1944 – Made Head Boy

1945 – Finishes Hogwarts with honors

1945 – Asks to remain at Hogwarts and become a teacher

1945 – Works at Borgin and Burkes

1945 – Dumbledore defeats Grindelwald

1955 – Applies for DADA job

“When did Dumbledore defeat Grindelwald? What month?” Susan asked.

“June,” Molly said instantly. “It didn’t take him very long after he left to go to Bavaria.”

“Tom Riddle might have had had another opportunity to visit the Chamber of Secrets. June 1945,” Hermione mused. “Maybe he’d left the other Horcrux down there and couldn’t get it because Dumbledore came back so soon.”

“He applied for the Defense job in 1945 and again in 1955, but he didn’t want the job. What did he want? Access to the school? Dumbledore wouldn’t even consider him. I reckon he couldn’t access the Chamber of Secrets during that visit,” Alyx said.

Later, Hermione gave Harry their conclusion. He wasn’t real happy but he agreed with their findings.

They needed to search the Chamber of Secrets.

... --- ...

They met Friday morning after the first class had started. Fred and George had offered to demonstrate some of their products out in the Quidditch field to cover for the missing professors who all wanted to visit the mythical Chamber of Secrets. Hagrid and Poppy were outside with the students. Fred and George had been given strict instructions not to cause so much as a scratch on any of the students and promised to be on their best behavior.

Thus the corridors were empty as they made their way to Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. Harry had explained how the chamber had been hidden in his second year and was a bit surprised that none of the staff or Professor Dumbledore had ever asked to go see it.

Molly and Hermione had insisted on joining the Horcrux team for the day. Harry brought Brigid the phoenix and the sword along. In truth, he had a very bad feeling about returning to the chamber.

Myrtle appeared as soon as she had heard the voices. “What are you doing...Oh, hello Professor.”

“Good morning, Myrtle,” replied Minerva. She had been classmates with Myrtle when she had died indirectly at the hand of Tom Riddle.

“Are you going down there again?” she asked to Harry.

He nodded grimly and went to the tap. For a minute he stared at the little snake scratched in the copper pipe. The others watched in rapt silence as he hissed, “Open” in Parseltongue.

A moment later the top slid away as it had before revealing the slide that led into the darkness. Hermione had asked Lavender to take photos as her camera had a large flash unit.

Myrtle zoomed by and said, “Remember, if you die, you can share my toilet.”

Hermione sniggered and Harry said, “Thanks Myrtle, but not today.”

She looked morose said “OK... Bye,” and floated back to her u-bend.

“I’ll go first,” said Harry. “The slide is pretty long. You’ll be on it for about two minutes or so. You’ll want to move away from it when you finish because the next person will be coming. Give yourselves about fifteen seconds after the person in front of you goes.”

“I’ll wait outside and keep any students from coming in,” said Arabella.

Harry rode down the slide. It was just as mucky as he remembered, lubricated by years of hand soap and water from the wash basin drain. The ride was either longer than he had remembered, or his twelve year old self was able to slide down faster than he could at seventeen.

Harry had his wand lit as he slid down. He was amazed at the smoothness of the cut of the tunnel leading down. Minerva and Hermione arrived next. Harry stood by the end of the slide and helped each person up as they finished their ride. Hermione put a Scourgify spell on everyone to clean the muck off the bottom of their robes.

Soon the professors and the members of the horcrux team had arrived.

With all of their wands lit, they could see the skeletons of the many small animals that had littered the bottom of the floor. Harry's concern with reentering the chamber was chiefly that there might well have been more than one basilisk. He wasn't eager to find another.

They made their way in silence. By unspoken agreement, the Horcrux team didn't bother Harry with a bunch of questions about his first time in the chamber. Slowly they made their way along the corridor until they reached the first shed snakeskin. Minerva gasped, "Merlin Harry, you said that the basilisk was big, but this is huge!" It was too, at least thirty feet long and obviously as wide as a steel drum.

"That was an old one. It grew quite a bit since then," Harry said grimly. A flash went off as Lavender took a photo.

As they made their way down the tunnel Remus looked sadly at Harry who now resembled James so much. Remus took that back, Harry was very different from his father. James Potter never had shouldered the weight of the wizarding world. Soon they got to the rockslide where Lockhart had tried to Obliviate them. The entrance that Ron had been able to dig out was still largely blocked, much too small for the adults. Harry and Ginny had been much smaller at the time.

They looked at the roof of the tunnel warily and Flitwick carefully began levitating some of the rocks out of the way. Remus asked Tonks and Justin to wait on this side of the tunnel collapse to be able to get help in the case of another collapse. Justin gave a sour look until Tonks gave him a scathing stare. After the others had moved on she said "Sturgis spent six months in Azkaban for the Order following Dumbledore's orders and never said a word. You can stand watch for three efen hours. Don't be a wanker. Do your job."

Several minutes later Harry and the others reached the pillared entrance. Again Harry hissed "Open," as Lavender took another photo.

Harry hid his annoyance and they moved on. Too soon they became aware of the smell of slowly decomposing flesh. A minute later they

came across the gigantic carcass of the dead basilisk. "God in heaven," muttered Hermione. "I had no idea it was that big. You seriously underplayed that story Harry." Seeing his dark look and lack of response she took his hand and whispered, "I'm sorry Harry. Everything will be OK."

Molly stood frozen, staring at the dead monster. She couldn't stop thinking about her Ginny controlling this creature, and that Harry had killed it and saved her life. How could he have done that? He was only a boy. Arthur put his arm round her, trying to comfort her, but knowing that there was nothing they could do to bring her back.

Remus, Hooch, Lavender and Roger helped Professor Sprout harvest the useable materials from the basilisk. They spent the next hour carefully removing the fangs and big sections of the hide, both of which were virtually priceless and next to impossible to find.

The torches lit themselves as they entered the rest of the chamber. At the far end, there was a large pool of dried ink on the floor - all that remained of the diary version of Tom Riddle. Harry looked at Molly and Arthur sadly and said, "We should get started."

Bill said, "If you find any object, call me before you touch it. It might be the horcrux, or it could be cursed."

Within minutes they began finding things, mostly books and manuscripts. Some were quite ordinary except for their heritage; others appeared to be priceless originals written by Slytherin himself.

Then Minerva found it. On a table off in one of the side corridors were volumes and charts describing the Horcrux creation process and a wooden object with a carved shaped head. The shaft had an inscription on it - Gryffindor.

"Don't touch it," cried Bill." He ran his wand along the object and set up a silver instrument by the object. Bill tapped the instrument and a minute later it emitted a smoky image of a seventeen-year-old Tom Riddle.

Harry and Hermione began smirking and laughing to some private joke. Hermione whispered something in Harry's ear and he bit his lip hard to keep from laughing.

Ten minutes later a very frustrated Bill and Minerva came up to the pair. McGonagall asked, "Please tell us exactly what is so funny, Mr. Potter."

Harry asked, "Do any of you know what that is?"

Everyone shook their head.

Harry asked, "Bill, aside from it being a horcrux, is it cursed in any way?"

Bill looked at it again warily, shook his head and said, "No. It's OK to pick it up, whatever it is."

Harry picked it up, pulled a small white object out of his pocket, carefully set it on the ground and tapped it with the object. The ball rolled about four feet and hit Hermione's foot.

He smiled, picked up the ball and said, "This was Gryffindor's putter. He must have helped invent the game of golf."

Hermione rolled her eyes and muttered, "At least he didn't leave his... oh never mind."

They gathered up the objects that they found and very carefully made their way back to the entrance. In several trips Brigid carried them back up to the girl's bathroom. They put the basilisk pieces in a locked room and met back at Minerva's office for a few minutes. Harry mentioned that the next Order meeting would be next Wednesday then asked Bill, Molly and Arthur to come visit with him in his room.

The Professors made their way outside where Fred and George had delighted the students with their wares, which were substantially charm work and potion based. The students applauded Fred and George and the staff thanked them. Of course the ever-

entrepreneurial twins had passed out samples and owl-order forms. None of the students had noticed that most of the staff had been missing for the last three hours.

... --- ...

Bill, Molly and Arthur sat down on one of the sofas in Harry's sitting room. Molly had been especially moved by the experience of seeing where two of her children had almost died.

Arthur knew that Harry was still carrying an unspeakable amount of guilt over the loss of Ron and Ginny. He said, "Harry we miss them too. I'd say more than you could know, but I believe you do know how we feel. I realized something today. You helped give us four extra years with Ron and Ginny. For that Molly and I thank you with all of our hearts."

Harry looked into Arthur's tired eyes and nodded. He suddenly felt guilty over dating Hermione. Molly seemed to have sensed it and said, "Harry please don't feel guilty over having feelings about Hermione. You're not betraying Ron, you're not betraying Ginny and you're certainly not betraying Arthur and I. You will always hold a special place in our hearts, dear."

Harry looked at her, and felt like a boulder had been lifted from his shoulder. He nodded and said, "Thanks." There was another lump in his throat so he couldn't say more.

A moment later, Arthur got up and Molly followed. Arthur said, "Thank you for the opportunity to let us see that place for ourselves. It helped us. Thank you."

Bill nodded, and they left.

... --- ...

Saturday morning Harry sat back in the soft chair by the bed and continued to stare at the woman asleep in his bed. After the trip to the Chamber of Secrets neither of them had wanted to sleep alone. Harry was unbelievably glad she was there.

They had not gone any further than some heavy snogging and a few touches that had been mostly instinctual. He was being very careful not to push her into something that she was not ready for, but the physical connection that they had made was growing. Every night, before they parted for bed, it was getting harder to not put his hands or his mouth on places that were filling his better dreams.

His dreams seemed to be fueled by too many years of listening to Seamus brag up his exploits. Harry had no idea if the things that Seamus said were true or not. But he believed that Hermione would smack the snot out of him if he tried any of those moves.

However that didn't stop him from dreaming about it.

He had awoken first today and realized that he was poking her in the back. After he had shifted his hips away from her she had snuggled back into him purring like Crookshanks as she shifted her hips to match his.

He had given Hermione a very large hickey the night before. Neither was very impressed by it, and Harry had apologized later for having done something so foolish.

Hermione continued to breath deeply, her breath pushing the hair covering her face up with each time she exhaled. Harry had been amused to discover that no matter what Hermione did to her hair at night it always escaped the braid or pony tail. He rather enjoyed brushing her hair out for her each night.

There was a light pop and one of the house elves appeared with a tray of breakfast. Harry thanked him and the elf escaped quickly. He conjured a red rose and set it on tray and the tray on his chair.

"Hermione?" He said brushing the hair back from her face. She moved her arm up over her eyes and rolled over.

"Hermione. It's time to get up," he said louder. She groaned. He remembered Dan saying something about not talking to Emma until she had been awake for a hour.

"Come on Hermione. We've got things to do today," he said giving her a little shake.

"Let someone else do them," she muttered. My dream was just getting good, she thought grumpily.

"I've got breakfast for you. All your favorites," he said. He got off the bed and picked up the tray. Hermione glared at it as she sat up. Breakfast? What was breakfast compared to a dream inspired by too many years of listening to Lavender talk about her sexual exploits?

"Harry it is six o'clock on Saturday morning. What is it that can't wait?" She asked as he sat the tray in front of her. He handed her the rose and ignored her question.

"You need to be ready to go by ten and I know that since you will not be in the library at all today and possibly tomorrow, you'd want at least an hour to study," he told her. She inhaled the fragrance from the rose and some of the crankiness left her eyes.

"No library?" She asked warily.

"Nope. No books, no library, no writing essays. We are going to relax," he said firmly. He knew full well that her homework was already done. He had watched her finish it the night before.

"Well, all right, I guess. What are we going to do?" She asked. He grinned.

"It's a surprise. You need to pack. We're leaving for the weekend," he told her.

"If I don't know where we are going, how can I pack?"

"Ah well. Let's see... Muggle clothes. Dress to be outside today. I believe it is supposed to be round 15 today though colder tonight. Wear comfortable shoes. Something nice to wear to dinner tonight and you'll need clothes for tomorrow afternoon."

"Afternoon?" She asked picking up a slice of bacon. Her brain was still waking up.

"I thought we would pop over and see your parents," he said. She smiled.

"And you and Dad can get nine holes in?" She asked already knowing. He tried to look sheepish, but it didn't work.

"Am I that transparent?" He asked. She nodded her head and popped the bacon in her mouth.

They ate breakfast and then Hermione showered. Harry had woken at five and taken care of his body's reaction to having a beautiful woman pressed against it as he slept. His shower was out of the way.

Hermione packed quickly. Harry watched and made a few comments about the clothes she was taking. When she finished he went to find the headmistress to let her know where they would be for the weekend. After he left, she pulled out the box of condoms and stared at it for a full minute. She put the box away without opening it. Then she set off to the library.

Professor McGonagall agreed that they needed to get away. She knew the enormous pressure that they were both under and didn't want either of them to crack. School had been in session for two weeks and she could see the pressure that they were under already taking its toll.

McGonagall knew that some students would accuse her of favoritism. She had given them privileges that no other student had ever been allowed. But these were not just normal students - this was Harry Potter and Hermione Granger. They, along with Ronald Weasley, had saved the Stone at the age of eleven to begin a career at Hogwarts that was unparalleled.

The Ravenclaw girl, Lisa Turpin, who had made the disparaging remarks about Hermione being head girl, was not the only student to grumble about McGonagall's choices. She would not have known

about it but for Emma Granger's almost too casual of a mention. It had taken McGonagall a week to find out who had said it.

She had taken no course of action and as always Hermione had ignored the remarks. It was admirable, but McGonagall could see that it just added to the head girl's stress level.

Harry found the Professor in her office. He handed the headmistress a sheet of parchment. She looked over his itinerary and smiled.

"When will you be leaving?" McGonagall asked looking over her square glasses.

"As soon as I can drag her out of the library," he commented. McGonagall smiled.

"Dinner time then?" she asked. He laughed.

"The seventh year prefects are going to patrol with the Auror Cadets tonight," he informed her.

"Very well. I spoke to Minister Abraxan last night. She offered the use of her winged horses and a carriage for your travels. I didn't tell her you were spending the weekend as muggles. She reiterated that if you need any help at all from the ministry to contact her," McGonagall told him. He nodded.

He left the office and set off in search of Neville. He found his friend in the Gryffindor common room playing chess with Dean Thomas. Harry pushed down the feelings of sadness as he thought of Ron. He also ignored the anger that flared when he saw Dean.

After Neville won, by a large margin, Dean left to find someone to sympathize with. He didn't go far as Harry heard him and Wendy Williams discussing football as he followed Neville up the stairs to his dorm.

Harry gave Neville his map and invisibility cloak. He informed Neville that he and Hermione were leaving the castle for the weekend and that Neville had permission to wander at all hours. He suggested that

Neville find time to introduce himself to Mrs. Figg so that her kneazles would know to leave him be. Harry also noted that Luna Lovegood also had the same privileges.

They both agreed that no one else needed this information.

Around nine thirty Harry hauled Hermione out of the library under threat of being stunned. They were dressed as muggles albeit more dressed up than regular muggle teenagers. Hermione thought that the clothes they were wearing would have not looked out of place on her parents when they were at work.

They flooed to the Three Broomsticks from McGonagall's office and then he slipped an arm over her shoulder.

"Ready?" He asked. She nodded and he side-along apparated them to their destination.

He carried both of their bags and Hermione looked around. She wondered if Harry knew how famous The Howard Hotel was in the muggle world.

She was examining the architecture and decor as Harry spoke to the manager. The manager was flustered and Hermione approached them to see what the problem was.

"Mr. Potter, when your reservations were made we had no idea that you were of the Godric Hollow Potters. I apologize for not having the Marchmont suite available for you," the manager was saying.

Harry shook his head as if to clear it and then asked, "You know my family?"

"Of course. Your grandparents stayed here many times and your parents spent their honeymoon here. Tragic what happened to them," the older man commented.

"Yes, it was," Harry, said wondering if the man knew the truth. He continued, "The Marchmont suite is probably too much for our needs

anyway, Mr. Downright. We'll only be staying the night. Whatever you have for us will be fine."

"We have you put in the Charlotte suite. It's one of our junior suites but should suit you. Gavin is assigned as your personal butler. If you need anything you may call on him," Mr. Downright said motioning to a man standing nearby. Gavin approached quickly when summoned. Harry was just glad he didn't bounce around like Dobby.

He offered Gavin his hand to shake and then introduced Hermione. They followed the butler to their suite and were amazed. The butler pointed out the amenities that they were in the room. He was surprised that neither of the teens seemed to have any interest in the cable television, the Playstation, the brand new Internet connections or the world radio stations.

He mentioned the five star dining at the Atholl and the 24-hour room service. While Hermione was in the bathroom he told Harry that a romantic table for two in their private quarters was not unusual. Harry smiled at the thought.

"I have reservations at The Witchery for dinner. What do you suggest we see in Old Town?" he asked as Hermione joined them.

"What are some of your interests?" Gavin asked, as he seemed to mentally think about it.

Spell creation, advanced warding and stopping Death Eaters, Hermione thought. She spoke out loud, "Are there any bookshops close by?"

Harry snickered and she gave him a smirk.

"If you are interested in books then you must see the National Library of Scotland and the Edinburgh Central Library. They face each other down past the offices of Parliament. There are a number of bookshops in the area also," Gavin told her.

"We are not spending all day at the library, Hermione," Harry told her trying to look adorable and not sound whiney. She laughed.

"I know, dear. I'll try to keep it at four, maybe five hours," she replied teasing.

"I've read about shops in the Grassmarket area..." Harry said in a leading question. The older man nodded.

"There are many shops along the Royal Mile also. My personal favorite is the Fudge House on Canongate." Gavin brought them a map and made a few other suggestions.

They were holding hands as they left the hotel. Edinburgh Castle looked impressive but since they spent almost ten months of the year at Hogwarts neither was interested.

They started with Grassmarket and checked out some of the shops.

Mary Mallinson Antiques held quite a surprise as they found a Pensieve. While Hermione was examining some ancient swords Harry bought it and had it shipped to the mail drop Remus had set up for him. He also bought a painting. Caberet Antiques didn't have any magical items but Hermione seemed to have fun looking at the old items. Harry was a bit bored.

He pulled her into the Scotland T-shirt Company and they had a laugh at some of the slogans. Harry bought himself five shirts, each worse than the last, in Hermione's opinion. He just seemed so happy to do it that she didn't tell him that neon green and electric purple were not his colors.

While Hermione explored the Old Town Bookshop, Harry slipped off to Cool Joe's jewelers. He wanted to get that mother's ring Hermione had not been able to buy. He also picked up a couple other items and had all of them shipped to his mail drop except for the one that he planned on presenting to Hermione for her birthday.

They browsed the clothing boutiques of Pine and Old Lace and Odd One Out. They got the giggles knowing that some of the old style clothing would have made many a witch or wizard happy.

They agreed that Gerry's sweet shop was nice but it was nothing like Honeydukes. Hermione mentioned that her father's downfall in sweets was fudge and that she would like to visit the Fudge House that Gavin had suggested. Since it was at the other end of the Royal Mile they decided to explore their way to it.

They walked from Grassmarket to George IV Bridge and found the libraries that Gavin had mentioned. Hermione didn't enter either of them. She just made a note of a safe place to apparate near by. She mentioned bringing Emma and Harry chuckled.

"You'll be gone for days," he teased. She squeezed his hand as they walked on.

"Think of the number of holes you can play," she retorted and he laughed again.

They made their way down High Street stopping in the Museum of Childhood for a brief time. Harry hadn't realized that seeing all of the childhood things that he had not been given would make him feel so bad. He tried to hide it, not wanting to ruin the good time they were having, but Hermione knew. After they left she gave him a long tight hug.

Subdued a bit they walked down North Bridge and stopped for a light lunch at Pizza Hut. Both were willing to skip Bella Italia based solely on its name. While Harry finished his coffee from Ban Bou's, Hermione had discovered Southside Books.

Hermione found the fudge shop and bought her father a treat. They also bought a couple bars for each of their professors.

At Historic Connections, they finished a great deal of their Christmas shopping.

Then they checked out Nicholson's Highland wear but Hermione couldn't talk Harry into buying kilt. When they examined the sgian dubh's daggers, they agreed that having a weapon that they didn't know how to use would be useless. Harry mentioned that Moody could probably teach him and Hermione became silent.

"You're not still bothered about my getting advanced lessons are you?" He asked as they left the shop and strolled towards Holyrood Palace.

"No, not really," she said lightly squeezing his hand.

"You never told me why it bothered you," he suddenly realized.

"I felt, well feel really, like you're leaving me behind," she said with a shrug. She saw the look on his face and continued, "I don't like not being there. I know my place Harry, but for years it was right beside you. It's hard to let someone else step up."

He didn't know how to respond. He wanted her by his side. He wanted to know that the person next to him was someone he could trust without question. He trusted the order members and to a larger extent the ministry Aurors. But they didn't share the history that he and Hermione did. None of them had risked everything at the age of eleven, yet 'I don't want you to have to learn how to kill people.' Harry put it away. It was a horrible thought.

Hermione changed the subject abruptly, effectively ending the topic. It was awkward but they were both grateful.

Instead of walking all the way back to the hotel they apparated directly to their room. They still had several hours until dinner so they decided to rest.

It wasn't cool enough to need a fire in the wonderful marble fireplace but Hermione examined it. She was surprised to find some floo powder residue in the bottom of it. She mentioned it to Harry and they decided to block the floo and put up anti-apparation wards. Both could hear Moody barking about constant vigilance.

Harry decided to take a short nap. Hermione opened one of the books she had bought and took pleasure in reading for something besides school and Order work.

Harry was still asleep, so she took a shower in the wonderful marble bathroom. It was a lot like the prefect bathroom at school but without the Roman pool. After her long shower, she put on her new under garments. She had never worn anything quite like them, but an-anti itching spell helped with the lace.

After putting on one of the fluffy comfortable robes, provided by the hotel, she woke up Harry. Unlike her, he popped out of bed fairly quickly. While he went to shower she finished dressing.

Her dress was black and covered less skin than she normally would have liked. She tried to remember exactly why she had bought such a revealing garment. She transfigured it to have larger straps for a dual purpose: to hide her red bra straps and to keep her cleavage from bursting out. She added a quick sticking charm to keep the bra straps from moving.

The low neckline showed the hickey. She scowled at it and placed a glamour charm over it. She again she wondered what Harry had been thinking when he had given her the mark. Of course she had not exactly been complaining at the time.

Harry came out of the bathroom with his hair still wet. It was slicked back in the same style Malfoy had worn his. She knew as soon as it dried it would be the adorable mess she loved to run her hands through.

“You look wonderful,” he complimented.

She was focused on the wand holster that she was attaching to her leg. Her dress had a pocket that her wand poked through. As she struggled with it Harry knelt in front of her and helped her. She swallowed hard as his hands touched her upper thigh.

She kissed him softly and then pulled him into a gentle hug.

He fought with his tie as she fought with her hair. After years of experience with both they should have had an easy time of it. They didn't. They won their battles about the same time.

His suit was a navy color that looked nice on him. She told him so and he looked in the mirror again. His hair had once again started to stick up. He pressed it down and then removed his hand. It popped back up.

"I can relate," she told him as they stood to leave.

She wore comfortable flat shoes that she could run in if she needed to. She hated that she had to think of such things. He helped her with her transfigured cloak.

It wasn't a long walk to The Witchery. As they approached the castle Hermione could see a ghost standing in one of the castle windows.

"Maybe we should have explored the castle," she commented pointing it out to Harry. He put his arm around her.

"Next time," he promised. She smiled and gave him a quick kiss. He stopped her and pulled her close. The second kiss lasted longer.

They arrived at The Witchery, where they were seated in the Secret Garden after a short walk down a stone staircase. The room was beautiful, reminding Hermione of Hogwarts in more ways than one.

"Good evening Sir, Miss. I am Jeffery and I will be your server this evening. May I suggest a wine to go with your dinner?" their waiter asked.

"What do you recommend for dinner?" Hermione asked after he had filled their water goblets and agreed to return with some apple spice black tea. Wine may have been okay when they were safe at home, but neither wanted to be impaired in any way while in public.

"The roasted sea bass and caponata lasagna is excellent or the roast duck if you are not fond of food from the sea," he told her.

"Either sounds lovely," she said.

Jeffery then recommended a platter of Scottish seafood for two that included two half lobsters. He left them to discuss it as he went to

fetch their tea. Harry confessed to Hermione that he had never had seafood outside what they were served at Hogwarts.

“You only live once,” he said as he decided to try it. He wrinkled his nose and apologized knowing how it sounded. She waved him off with a short gesture.

“Don’t apologize. It’s true. Besides, you need something to be brave about other than the hyphenated one,” she told him. He smiled softly at her humor.

“So trying new foods it is,” he said raising his water goblet. She raised hers in return and they both laughed.

Jeffery returned for their order and poured their tea. As he left the table, Harry looked around taking in the place. The room had windows overlooking a terrace that Harry assumed was too cold to dine on.

A stone turret showing a coat of arms seemed to be the centerpiece of the room. He recognized it as the Duke of Gordon, keeper of the keys of Edinburgh Castle. He mentioned this to Hermione who seemed a little impressed. He grinned sheepishly and confessed that he had read it while researching a place to spend their day. He glanced at the tarot symbols on the ceiling and pointed them out to Hermione.

“Do you remember what they mean?” She asked remembering her mothers reading.

“Of course not. I only remember important things,” he said reaching in to his pocket. He placed the box on the table and pushed it towards her.

“What’s this?”

“I saw it and it had your name all over it,” he told her with a smirk. Then he added, “Happy Birthday.”

“My birthday’s not until Friday,” she said picking up the box.

"I know, but we've never really celebrated at school," he replied.

She opened the box and revealed a bracelet made of platinum links. Eight of them were shaped in letters that spelled her name. There were sapphires separating the links.

"It's beautiful," she gasped. He helped her with the clasp. She stared in wonder, "It's too much Harry, thank you."

"Nothing is too much," he replied. Then he continued, "You're much more important than some stupid tarot symbols."

"I didn't tell you about Mum's reading did I?" She asked picking up her teacup. He shook his head and she explained.

"Twins?" he chuckled.

"Then Lavender started in on how they might not be hers, they will just be in her life," Hermione told him. Harry thought about that and his soft laughter continued. "Oh it's funny is it? I think it helped Mum decide to bless me with 'The Talk' again."

"The talk?" Harry asked still amused.

"Oh yes. Better straighten up or I'll sic her on you," Hermione said with a wicked smile. He got serious quickly.

"She wouldn't... would she?" He asked.

"I doubt it. She'd probably ask my father to do it."

"Dan wouldn't..." Harry trailed off for a moment and considered her words. "He would, wouldn't he?"

"You better believe it," Hermione said almost smirking.

They were quiet for a few moments then Hermione excused herself to use the restroom. On the way back she palmed her wand and set up

warning wards in three different places around the room. When she sat back down Harry was looking at her, questioning.

She explained and then commented, "Moody makes an impression."

"That he does," Harry agreed.

She decided to change the subject because she didn't want to ruin the night.

She teased him about playing golf with her dad. He teased her back by inviting her to come along. She declined, quickly making a smart remark about not needing to know those manly things, which made him laugh.

She offered to share with him the details of 'The Talk' and he told her that they should wait until they got back to their room. She laughed at that.

Their food was wonderful and both were very glad for the good company. Jeffery took very good care of them and Harry tipped him very well. After splitting a chocolate torte with peppermint sorbet, they started back to their hotel. It was a nice evening so they took their time enjoying the night.

They stopped several times to kiss each time taking longer to start walking again.

When they entered their suite Harry pushed Hermione against the door as it closed and pressed his mouth on hers. Hermione leaned against the wall and Harry pressed himself against her. She felt familiar warmth as his tongue explored her mouth.

"I have been wanting to do that since I woke you up this morning," he said panting slightly when they finally broke apart.

"What took you so long?" she demanded pulling him back towards her. The second kiss lasted even longer. After several minutes he pulled away almost curtly and walked away.

Hermione felt all of her self-doubt rise once again. She followed him into the room with the bed. He was checking voice mail on his cell phone. She sat down on the edge of the bed and took off her wand holster.

"Anything interesting?" she asked dryly when he hung up.

"Not really. If it was an emergency McGonagall would have sent someone to find us," he said. She nodded knowing that they could never really get away completely.

"Harry, can I ask you something?" she asked calling on her Gryffindor courage.

"Of course," he replied.

"Why did you stop kissing me?" she asked. Seeing the look on his face she continued hastily, "You just stopped and walked away. It was abrupt."

"I was about to do something kind of inappropriate and I didn't want you to slap me," he said honestly.

"What were you going to do?" she asked, her eyes wide. He was blushing now. She encouraged, "Tell me."

He sat down next to her and took her right hand in his.

"I was going to put my mouth right here," he said as he ran one finger in the valley between her breasts.

"Why would I slap you for that?" she asked. He pulled his finger away but she took his hand and pulled it back.

"I don't want to do something that makes you uncomfortable," he said.

"I know, but you being a gentleman is driving me up the bloody wall," she growled. He blinked. Had she just sworn?

"What?" He asked in total confusion.

“Sorry. I’m just... really horny,” she confessed. His mouth dropped open and then he began to laugh.

“What a coincidence, so am I,” he said falling back on the bed. She lay down next to him and snuggled closely. He stroked her hair gently loving the feel of it.

“I don’t think either of us are ready to have make love, Harry. But there are other things we can do,” she said thinking about Lavender’s stories. She trailed her hand up and down his tie and he shivered.

“There is something...” he told her. Seamus’ exploits were running in his head. He rolled up on his side and then leaned down and kissed her gently.

“Something?” she asked softly. He nodded but didn’t speak. “I promise I’ll tell you if you do something that makes me uneasy, Harry.”

Again he abruptly moved away from her, standing up in one motion. She was about to keep her promise when he pulled her up to her feet and slid his arms around her.

“Right now, I want to dance,” he said simply. She nodded looking in to his eyes.

They found a channel on the radio that played soft music. Neither listened to the words, neither cared. Hermione wasn’t aware of the music most of the time. Harry’s idea of dancing involved his lips on her neck and ears as they rocked back and forth.

After the third song her hands began to wander. She ran her right hand down the inside of his thigh just as he had earlier while helping her with her wand. He groaned a little and nipped her neck with his teeth.

His hand slid up under her dress and felt her leg, then her hip and then her behind. His mouth was on hers when he moved his hand

around to her front and found the wetness that dampened the front of her knickers. She moaned into his mouth.

He removed his hand slowly. She was about to object when she he started fumbling with the zipper on the back of her dress. When she had put on the red lacy underwear she hoped that he would see them.

She tried to cancel the sticking charm that was keeping her straps up. He looked at her puzzled, "How do muggle women do it?"

"Beats me," she said placing her wand back on the bedside table.

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She snuggled against him drifting to sleep as he pulled the covers over them.

... --- ...

Harry and Hermione awoke fairly early Sunday morning. They were slightly awkward around each other until they discovered that the bathtub was big enough for two. After that, the shyness that had seemed to have developed went away. They spent most of the morning learning new things about each other.

They both agreed that they would not continue their exploration of each other while at the castle. It wouldn't be right, they agreed. They had the privilege of leaving whenever they wanted and Harry didn't foresee it as being an issue. He would take Hermione away every weekend if she wanted.

They ate lunch at number twelve with her parents. Harry clarified the positions that he wanted the Grangers to have in the Order.

While Dan and Harry escaped to the golf course, Hermione and Emma had another conversation. Emma had been shaken by the direct threat to her husband. It made things even more clear in her mind. Three people that she loved were on the top of a madman's list of people to torture and murder.

Hermione did her best to comfort her mum. She was only slightly unnerved by the role reversal that was happening. She hated seeing her mum so shaken.

They were back at school by dinnertime and Hermione decided to visit Gryffindor tower that evening. She helped Wendy Williams and Erin Erickson with their potions homework. Lavender took the time to tease Hermione about the twins again.

Dean and Seamus were sitting by the fireplace avoiding Hermione. She was reading a passage in the sixth year potions text silently when the boys both began to choke. A massive, slimy bat made its way out of Dean's nose first. They began to yell causing quite the commotion.

Everyone in the tower was watching them fight the bogies, so no one noticed the single book float gently off a table and back down.

Professor McGonagall entered the room and quieted the chaos with little more than a stern look and wave of her wand. It took her several tries to get rid of the hex.

"Hermione did it!" Dean yelled as best he could, still gagging.

Hermione offered her wand up without a word. Professor McGonagall performed the *Priori Incantatem* spell and found *Wingardium Leviosa*. She stared hard at the head girl trying to decide if Hermione was trying to not laugh or not cry. Wendy and Erin were both laughing so hard that they were crying.

McGonagall gave them all a short lecture on unbecoming and unacceptable behavior. She left the room with one last look at her students. She somehow managed to not smile until she was safely in her office, alone.

She knew that the Old-Crow should thank Dee, Steve and Hilary. She knew that if enough people sent an owl, that Dee would post the extended version on the Yahoo group. She knew that the really clever people could find the link on the Old-Crow's page. She knew that she hadn't heard the whole story.

Chapter 19

True to his word, Moody set up Harry against a dozen of the practice dummies. The old Auror collected Harry's wand, and his spare wand. Unbeknownst to Harry, Moody had also reset the anti-apparation wards in the training room.

Harry surprised Moody when he pulled the .45 that he'd loaned Dan Granger and shot eight of the practice dummies. The sound of the blast within the cavernous space shocked Moody back into full alert. He'd been helping himself to Harry's lunch after finishing his own. While Harry was inserting a new magazine into the pistol, Moody created another dozen of the dummies and set them loose.

The extra dummies had ruined Harry's plan. He'd only brought one extra magazine and would run out of bullets before he had finished off the dummies.

Pop! "Harry Potter Sir, Dobby has found what you need." Dobby handed Harry two more magazines, then gave Moody a bad look, knowing that Moody was eating Harry's lunch.

Harry gave the little elf a hug and said, "Thanks Dobby." The little elf disappeared. Harry quickly reloaded the magazines. Two minutes later, Harry sat down and said, "I'll have that last sandwich, thank you."

Moody gave the young man a "Moody grin" and said "Good job, Potter. What did you learn?"

Harry thought for a moment and replied, "If you take away the option of escaping, it really doesn't matter how good the opponents are if there are enough of them. Sooner or later, they'll get you."

"That's a lesson that works both ways Potter. If we go back to snatching the Death Eaters faster than Snake Lips can recruit them, he's got three options; use his dark creatures, use the Imperius, or fight us by himself."

“Who would be doing the recruiting? Riddle can’t exactly place position available notices in the Daily Prophet.”

“I’d say he did just as good by having that news story put in about his reward offer against Granger’s dad. Every Ne’er-do-well in Britain will be signing up and there’re always those that left Durmstrang.”

Harry nodded.

Moody continued, “It’d take somebody smart to recruit decent ones. I’d say he’s put Snape on it, the greasy bastard.”

Pop. Dobby appeared with two fine dinners with butterbeers and set them down. Harry thanked the little elf, who beamed at him. Moody looked at the food hungrily. Harry passed one of the plates over and asked, “Would you like one?” He thought of his friend Ron, and smiled.

Moody sniffed the food to be certain that it hadn’t been poisoned and said, “Thanks Potter. I am a bit hungry.” Harry smiled. Moody loved free food. After a few bites he said, “He obviously scared or bought somebody into a sympathetic at least or neutral position. They haven’t written anything against the dark side in...”

Harry finished his sentence, “Since the attack on those pressmen.”

Moody nodded and replied, “Tomorrow I’ll have a little talk with John Thomas and the Daily Prophet Editor Reggie McDonald on your behalf.”

As Moody finished his second dinner, Harry smiled at him and said, “Thanks Moody. You’re a good man.”

... --- ...

Harry was enjoying his classes this term, feeling that everything that he was learning was useful. Transfiguration was useful as they were learning to conjure objects at a faster and faster rate. Harry had seen Dumbledore conjuring objects to use as weapons or shields, and

knew that almost any spell could be used in an offensive or defensive way given the right circumstances.

“Today’s lesson will have you transfigure these Galleons into a gold plated shield that would reflect certain spells. She demonstrated and within moments the small stack of Galleons had been changed into a serving plate sized shield. “Miss Granger, would you cast a light stunner at me, please?”

Harry watched as Hermione did as she was asked. Much faster than he would have expected, McGonagall placed the shield in front of the jet of red light. The spell reflected off of the shield and hit Dean, knocking him to the floor.” Seamus had fallen over too trying to get out of the way.

Walking over to them and seeing that they weren’t really injured, McGonagall said, “Mr. Finnigan, perhaps you can revive your talkative friend. In the future it would do you both well to pay attention to where you are when you have your conversations, wouldn’t you agree?”

There was no doubt in Seamus’ mind what McGonagall had meant. He replied, “Yes Professor.” They had yet to apologize to Hermione for the trouble that they’d caused her family.

Susan looked at Harry nervously who immediately understood. He pulled a bag of 400 Galleons out of his robe and said, “Professor, these should be enough for everyone to use. They might not have brought their gold to class.”

McGonagall and Susan both gave him grateful looks and said, “Thank you, Mr. Potter.”

By the end of class everyone had made a very good shield. As class was letting out, Harry asked Susan to come over and visit them after dinner.

... --- ...

Hermione was studying in their room when she heard the soft knock on their door. She opened it and Susan was at the door. She gave the pretty witch a quick hug and invited her in. "Harry invited me over," she explained. "It's good to see you. We don't get to spend as much time visiting as we used to."

Hermione smiled back at her and said, "Susan, you don't need an invitation to stop by. We miss seeing you too. Come in."

Hermione showed her around for a moment and handed her a butterbeer before asking Susan to sit down at one of the sofas.

"Where's Harry?"

Hermione handed Susan an envelope and a small leather pouch and replied, "Harry had to go practice with the Cadets. I think he forgot until the last moment. He left this for you and we want you to please accept it in the spirit that it was intended. Promise?"

Susan looked more nervous than before.

"Please Susan?"

"OK." She opened the envelope that contained a Gringotts draft for twenty five thousand Galleons and a small bag that had a hundred loose galleons.

Susan's eyes dazzled as she thought for a moment and said, "Hermione, I can't accept this... It's Harry's... It's too much."

Hermione took a sip of her tea and replied, "Of course you can. Harry can afford it, and he wants to help you. Please don't hurt his feelings by refusing it. He was going to set this up for you before school, but things got a bit crazy with the attack at Hogsmeade. Please take it Susan. It's a magical draft. All you need to do is sign it and it will be transferred into your Gringotts vault. It will be enough gold for you to get started after school or to go to University."

The blond witch was grateful beyond words. She hugged her again and said, "Thank you, Hermione. Thank you so much. I really appreciate it."

Hermione thought for a moment and replied, "Susan, he's done the same thing for my parents. There're no strings with this. He just wants to do it. He thinks it's the right thing to do, and I agree with him. The other pouch is just for spending money."

"Thanks, Hermione."

"Cheers."

... --- ...

While Hermione was visiting with Susan, Harry was having fun with Alyx and the other Cadets. Gunner Fawcett was very good at magical fighting. Richard Chambers had a sharp mind but was much slower than the others in terms of quick reactions. He invariably had to create a shield as he could never simply move out of the way. Keith Bradley was somewhere in the middle.

Harry had the sense that even in their final stage of Auror training, they were still being trained to handle ordinary policework, and not to survive in a duel against Voldemort's best Death Eaters.

While Alyx, Gunner and Keith were practicing two against one duels, Harry was throwing tennis balls at Richard.

"Come on, Harry, this is stupid."

"Trust me Richard," said Harry bouncing a ball off Richard's head, "it's a good thing to practice."

"Being quick is nice, but having a good shield makes it moot." replied Richard in a way that reminded Harry of Percy. Harry knew that Richard had read that idea in a text someplace, and took it at face value.

Alyx overheard them and knew that her Cadet friend wouldn't survive a fight carrying that attitude. She conjured a watermelon and a three legged stool and then set the watermelon on the stool. The others stopped what they were doing and watched the Order of Merlin recipient at work. A moment later she said, "Richard, come over here please."

He did and she said, "Let's have a practical drill here. This watermelon is Minister Abraxan who is injured in an attack by a single Death Eater. Can you protect her for one minute until help comes?"

With the same misguided confidence Justin had exhibited in the prior week Richard replied, "No problem."

Harry closed his eyes for a moment and gave his head a tiny shake knowing where this was going. Alyx said, "Go ahead Keith, he's got his shield up give it your best shot."

Keith pulled his wand from his studded leather leg holster pointed it and said, "Stupefy." A jet of bright red light flew from his wand hit the shield which shimmered for a moment as the jet deflected away.

Richard smiled and said, "See. No problem." He winked at her indulgently.

Alyx bit her tongue for a moment and replied, "Again."

The shield shimmered a bit more but held.

"Again."

Keith missed.

"Again."

The shield shimmered for several seconds but the spell deflected. She doubted that it would have held against another stunner.

"OK, take a break for a moment," said Harry, handing them all a bottle of butterbeer. Alyx was disappointed. Richard had been wrong,

and they still needed to prove it to him, but she didn't want to stuff it in his face. She glanced at Harry who nodded. After their butterbeers, Harry said, "Richard, your shield held against your Death Eater. Gunner, your shield is pretty good, why don't you try it? You protect the Minister, and I'll be the bad guy. Let me know when you're ready."

A moment later Gunner had his shield in place. Harry fired, "Reducto." The orange blast flew past the shield as if it weren't there and sprayed them all with chunks of watermelon.

"He didn't use a stunner," whined Richard.

"Death Eaters don't either," snarled Alyx pelting him with a tennis ball. "Now move your ass before I smack you again." She pulled out a handful of tennis balls and began chasing him around the room as Gunner vanished all of the bits of the simulated Minister.

"In the future, I hope you'll take better care of me than that," said Minister Abraxan who had come in unnoticed. "As evidenced by the demise of Minister Scrimgeour, Death Eaters rarely cast stunners. Mr. Potter, if you have a moment, may I have a word with you?"

They walked into one of the unused classrooms and Abraxan closed the door behind her. She looked at Harry for a moment and said, "Thank you for taking your time to help the cadets, Harry. I thought the tennis ball idea was brilliant."

"Thanks," said Harry wishing that he'd dressed a bit better for the occasion. "How long were you there?"

"I arrived about the time that you landed a ball on Cadet Chamber's head. Master Auror Moody informed me about your success beneath the castle. He told me that you'll likely need the Ministry's help in the capture of the next horcrux."

Harry nodded and replied, "We'll need to know when Riddle is away from his snake Nagini, and where he's keeping it."

"It may take a few weeks, but I'll try to have him located. On a different subject, I received a report from Ron Weasley's caseworker.

He's in between terms and is being tutored so that he will be successful for his final year at the private school that he was enrolled at. The caseworker reported no problems. I'll pass along any updates that I receive. Enjoy your evening, Mr. Potter."

"Thank you, Minister. You too." Harry was relieved to hear about Ron, yet the news hurt. He walked back to his room with a lump in his throat.

... --- ...

Wednesday evening was the Order meeting. As they had a success to talk about, Harry let Bill, Hermione, Alyx, Remus and Minerva tell their stories to the others. Remus reported, "We recovered over three hundred square feet of basilisk skin and nineteen fangs."

Hagrid gave out a (really) low whistle and exclaimed, "Blimey!"

Harry asked, "What's up?"

Flitwick explained, "Basilisk skin makes almost mythically protective armor. I doubt that you could have pierced him even with that impressive sword of yours anywhere but in the mouth. How on earth did you manage to slay such a thing?"

Harry smiled sadly and replied, "That's why they only found 19 fangs. It got me with one."

There was stunned silence in the room. Few of them had heard the real tale of Harry's battle with the giant creature. Harry told of his desperate fight with the monster and the aid that he'd received from Fawkes. It seemed a lot more frightening to the others as he told his tale when some of them had actually seen the beast and knew if anything, Harry was understating what had happened.

Lightening the mood, Harry asked Fred how the product demonstration went. He laughed and replied, "We fired off four hundred Galleons of product and took orders for ten times that. Can we come and act as the diversion on your next adventure too?"

Arabella shook her head and said, "Lord help us. There'll be dung bombs, fireworks and portable swamps all over now."

Flitwick stood and everyone sat down. He flicked his wand and the whiteboard that Hermione had used complete with the writing reappeared.

TM Riddle

1926 – December 31 b.

1938 – Began Hogwarts

1943 – Learns about Horcruxes

1943 – Late spring - Opens Chamber of Secrets

1943 – Murders Myrtle

1943 – Kills Riddle Sr. and Paternal grandparents

1943 – Creates diary

1944 – Made Head Boy

1945 – Finishes Hogwarts with honors

1945 – Asks to remain at Hogwarts and become a teacher

1945 – Works at Borgin and Burkes

1945 – Dumbledore defeats Grindelwald

1955 – Applies for DADA job

Everyone glanced at it and he continued. "I have exhaustively studied the notes and materials that were found in the chamber. From it I have several theories and conclusions. First, I believe that the soul splitting ritual is literally that, a split. That means the largest piece was put into the first object, the diary. Recall that Harry destroyed the

diary before Voldemort's rebirth. The loss of a large part of his soul helps explain the change in appearance between the 1980 version and the 1995 photo that you gave us where he had taken on some snakelike characteristics."

"Based on accounts from students who saw him while he was a student at the castle, there was definitely a change in attitude and behavior, though there was no change of appearance." He redrew the whiteboard. Based on the notes and our latest information, the chart would look like this.

TM Riddle

1926 – December 31 b.

1938 – Began Hogwarts

1943 – Learns about Horcruxes

1943 – Late spring - Opens Chamber of Secrets

1943 – Kills Riddle Sr. and Paternal grandparents – finds ring

1943 – Creates first horcrux – diary (1/2)

1943 – Murders Myrtle

1944 – Made Head Boy

1945 – Creates second horcrux – putter (1/4)

1945 – Dumbledore defeats Grindelwald

1945 – Finishes Hogwarts with honors

1945 – Creates third Horcrux – ring (1/8) could be second or third horcrux

1945 – Asks to remain at Hogwarts and become a teacher

1945 – Works at Borgin and Burkes

1945 – Creates fourth horcrux – cup (1/16)

1945 – Creates fifth horcrux – locket (1/32)

1955 – Applies for DADA job

1980 – Embedded Nagini as sixth Horcrux (1/64)

Hermione was mentally checking Flitwick's math as he went along, writing notes as quickly as she could. There were a million questions on her mind, but she reverted to student mode and listened attentively.

Flitwick continued, "There are no definitive answers regarding how many pieces he could make, though there are no recorded cases of a seventh split." Hermione had only marginal comfort at this statement.

Flitwick continued, "The next piece seems to contradict what Bill had found. There is anecdotal evidence that the owner would have some sensation of loss when the soul piece is released from the Horcrux and dissipates. The specific incident occurred in 1902 but the witch was wearing the horcruxes on her person. She screeched as if in great pain as the pieces were ripped from her and destroyed. Finally there is contradictory evidence whether or not the person loses any power as the pieces are destroyed."

Moody considered his words and said, "That could explain why he's had others do much of his fighting in the last few years."

Lavender asked, "What do you mean?"

Moody replied, "In the first war it seemed like he was always there, doing some of the killing."

Hagrid nodded and said, "I saw em kill the McMasters in about 1975. Barely got away meself."

Harry said, "That doesn't make sense. He dueled Dumbledore. I saw it."

Kingsley replied, "He dueled an extraordinarily gifted, 156 year old wizard to a draw in a duel that lasted no more than three or four minutes. Most likely they were both exhausted."

Tonks added, "The professor was probably already tired from rounding up the rest of the Death Eaters."

Moody snorted, "How would you know? You were unconscious."

"Was not. I saw you crawling on the floor looking for your eyeball."

Harry glanced at Flitwick who was suppressing a smile and nodded. Harry added, "Is there anything else, Professor?"

He replied, "No Harry. I'm truly sorry that I don't have any definitive answers to these questions. There simply haven't been many cases to study and the ones that there were all ended up dead, dark, wizards or witches."

Remus quipped, "At least that's an encouraging trend. Are we ready to talk about the planned captures?"

Harry asked, "To clarify what you've suggested, he may have lost stamina rather than power or skill? Is that why you're suggesting that he leaves fights early or has others kill for him?"

Flitwick and Moody nodded. "Flitwick replied, "We certainly hope so, Harry."

... --- ...

While Moody and Tonks were taking playful jabs at each other, Snape was sitting in a dingy bar in Murmansk. He'd had some success recruiting in Kiev, Minsk, and Bucharest. Budapest had been less successful. He'd been robbed and thrown into the river for dead.

Two men walked into the bar, wearing field coats. They were easily 225 pounds, over six feet tall, muscular wearing the crew cut blond haircut of men who were squared away. Snape initially thought of Crabbe and Goyle until he caught a glimpse of the hard look in their eyes. These men were not morons. The two men eyed Snape for a moment, and knew him to be the wizard whom they had received word of.

"You work for this Voldemort, da?"

"Yes."

"He pays hundred thousands galleons if we kill him his muggle, da?"

"The Dark Lord will pay you that if you capture the muggle, alive, uninjured and bring the muggle to him. Here are a thousand galleons for each of you. He pays at least a thousand galleons a month for those who join him. Are you interested?"

"Da. We go with you now." The two men pocketed the bags of coins.

Snape nodded and handed them a portkey. These two were numbers thirty-nine and forty respectively. Few of the recruits had any real skill, but the published report of the reward against Dan Granger had made his job easy. It was time to go back and give them some training.

... --- ...

Abraxan looked at the eleven witches sitting in her office. She had known each of them since their birth and they were now in their early twenties. She knew each of them to be absolutely loyal. She knew that most likely they would identify the neighborhood where Voldemort was staying by their disappearance. They would be looking for a country home or a larger home in a secluded neighborhood. They would be paired with an ordinary policeman who would drive them from neighborhood to neighborhood in a police van. The witches would be in the back testing the neighborhood for trace magical signatures.

She knew that she would accumulate a list of several hundred homes and have to work through the list by sending in ordinary policemen to investigate. Again she was certain that they would announce success through their own deaths or disappearances. Each evening the officers would be observed for signs that they were under an Imperius curse. The witches wouldn't be told that they were looking for Voldemort's snake; simply that they were looking for Death Eaters.

She had the highest degree of respect for Potter and his order. They were doing something that her own Ministry Aurors were largely unable to do according to Ministry law. They were doing something that most likely hadn't been done when Dumbledore was running the Order. They were taking the war to Voldemort. If she could locate his hideout by borrowing nonmagical manpower, and help shorten the war, she would risk lives to save lives.

... --- ...

The three teams assembled at the castle at 4:00 AM Friday morning in the practice room. Harry had awoken at 3:00. He showered, and slipped on his body armor, wand holster, extra wand, the pistol and his cellular telephone. He and Arthur along with Cadets Richard Chambers and Keith Bradley would serve as the backup team.

Luna had volunteered to take Lavender's place. Lavender hadn't been feeling well in the last few days and Harry felt confident regarding Luna's skills.

Harry wasn't very happy being on the backup team, but each of the team leaders Moody, Remus and Tonks agreed that he was the guy who they wanted to be able to be there on a moments notice if things got ugly.

Lee Jordan had made the portkeys a few days earlier when he'd found the locations.

Each of the teams brought two sets of anti-apparation manacles. Chambers was holding the last set and thought better than to mention that he wasn't authorized to use them yet. He didn't want another tennis ball landing on his head.

Each team was carrying a portkey to take the anticipated prisoner to the Ministry holding cells. They also had a dose of blood restorative potion and emergency portkeys back to Hogsmeade station. Poppy would be waiting there, kit in hand in the event that there were injuries.

Hermione was there helping as she could. She was nervous for the others but grateful that Harry probably wasn't going anywhere. After a quick cuppa they all walked down the front lawn of the castle and the three insertion teams activated their portkeys and vanished. Harry held Hermione's hand as they walked to the train station with the others. It was far enough away so that the cellular telephones would work and had the sheltered benches where they could wait in relative comfort.

The plan was very similar to what they'd used before. They took the portkey to within a half mile of the destination and walked to the respective houses before it got light out. Between 6:30 and 7:00 they would release an ordinary looking owl that would tap on the windows. When the intended target opened the door or window, the others would fire stunners while the person holding the manacles would rush the house. The times were staggered so that in the event of a serious problem, the later raids could be halted if backup wasn't available.

Tonks, Alyx, Gunner and Neville found Jacob Flint's home outside of Gloucester and quickly made their way to a covered position. They were to release their owl at 6:30. Alyx and Gunner waited silently disillusioned on either side of the back door. Neville waited at the corner of the house nearest to the front entrance while Tonks was on the side of the house in visual sight of all of them.

At 6:00 lights appeared in the house and it took all of their patience to remain where they were. Tonks had Hermione's number set on her cellular telephone for immediate use if needed. At 6:30 she released the owl and as expected, it went to the back door and tapped on the door.

Like clockwork, Flint opened the door to retrieve the owl and Alyx stunned him. Before he'd hit the ground, Gunner was running up to him and had him manacled. Fifteen seconds later they had all left.

... --- ...

At 6:45 the team of Remus, Kingsley, Bill and Luna went to work. They were in Leeds at the home of Tom Boyl. Kingsley and Bill were waiting on either side of the back door and Luna was by the front door. Remus was on the side of the house and let the owl go. Unexpectedly it flew past Luna and tapped on the window just feet away from where she was standing. Within seconds Boyl began opening the window. Luck was against them. Leaves were blowing in the autumn wind and several hit the disillusioned outline of Luna exposing her. Boyl hit her with a cutting hex even as Remus fired a Reducto blast at him.

Luna and Boyle both collapsed. Kingsley administered the blood restorative potion and had her portkeyed back within seconds. Remus and Bill grabbed the still form of Boyle and portkeyed him back to the station.

They reappeared and Poppy was aiding her within seconds, first stopping the worst of the bleeding while Hermione administered another blood restorative potion. Within ten minutes she was stabilized. As they hadn't called for backup, Harry let the third raid proceed.

... --- ...

While Poppy was helping Luna, things had completely fallen apart at the grab at Travers' home. The owl had gone to the back door and Moody was searching the inside of the home with his magical eye when Travers opened the door. Moody saw the other three Death Eaters just as George fired the stunner to drop Travers. He pressed the talk button and Harry's telephone rang showing Moody as the caller. Moody shifted his position to be ready to provide firepower at the back. Fred was at the door with the anti-apparation manacles when the top of the door blew apart from a Reducto blast by one of the other Death Eaters who was indoors.

The other two dashed out the front door knocking Lee over. Fortunately they did not see Lee and missed the fact that they had knocked him over. They were turning the corner to fire at Moody when Harry and the others arrived via portkey at the front of the house. One of the Death Eaters turned and fired at Harry just missing Bradley who flattened to the ground. Richard Chambers and Arthur fired stunners at the same Death Eater while Harry fired a Reducto at the Death Eater who was taking aim at Moody.

Meanwhile Fred activated the portkey with him and Travers leaving Moody and George to manacle the third Death Eater. George was placing the manacles on the fallen Death Eater as he saw the jet of green light zoom just to the right of Moody. A second later he heard the smack of Harry's shot hitting the Death Eater at the right ribcage severing his arm at the elbow.

The wounded Death Eater grabbed his emergency portkey before he fell to the ground and activated it a moment later, leaving the other two unexpected Death Eaters on the ground.

"We need to leave here, now," yelled Harry. "One got away and he could be sending a pile of,"...Pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop. Moments later there were a dozen Death Eaters in the front yard. Harry dashed to the fallen Death Eater and grabbed him as he activated his portkey. Moody ran to George and growled "Go." He saw George and the Death Eater disappear and activated his own portkey just as three of the newly arrived Death Eaters had turned the corner.

... --- ...

Moments earlier John Thomas had received a call that Aurors and at least one Mediwitch were needed at Hogsmeade Station. He ran flat out to the Auror ready room and yelled at the two Aurors who were there to get to Hogsmeade Station immediately. He apparated to St. Mungo's and left seconds later with two Medi-Witches.

Pop, pop, pop, pop, pop. They arrived within 45 seconds of the call.

In the meanwhile, Poppy had transported Luna to the hospital wing accompanied by Tonks, Gunner and Alyx. Kingsley was checking the anti-apparation manacles on the unconscious Death Eater Travers as the Medi-Witches and Aurors arrived.

Thomas arrived last, in time to see Potter, Moody and George arrive with two more Death Eaters. Harry restunned his man as he had no anti-apparation manacles on. Thomas saw him and called to the two Aurors who'd accompanied him to manacle the prisoner.

"We didn't bring any," called the first Auror.

"I've got it," said Harry who pulled a set out of his robes and placed them around the Death Eater's wrists.

Harry saw Hermione drenched in blood, ran to her and gave her a crushing hug. "What happened?" he asked breathlessly.

Hermione managed to say, "Luna." Harry was holding her so tightly.

"Is she?"

"She was cut pretty badly," said Kingsley. "She's had at least two units of blood restorative potion. Healer Pomfrey and three others went to help her." Kingsley looked around and said, "No one else was injured."

The mediwitches had checked on Death Eater Tom Boyl and pronounced him dead. Moments later Minister Abraxan arrived, took a moment to survey the scene and asked, "Director Thomas what's the situation?"

Thomas said, "Three known Death Eaters and two that we haven't met apparently were captured by these people. One of the militia was wounded."

Abraxan looked around again and said, "Arthur, Senior Auror Shackbolt, I believe you both have jobs to get to. Enjoy your day gentlemen." She turned to the two Aurors who were standing looking bewildered and said, "Director Thomas, could you assist Aurors

Wilderberry and McDonald in transporting and interrogating these prisoners? I'll meet you back in my office at ten." She turned to the two Medi-Witches and said, "Please check in with Master Healer Pomfrey before you return to St. Mungo's. Thank you both for responding so quickly." They turned and began walking to the castle.

She turned to the others and said, "Master Auror Moody, it appears that you and your friends had an interesting morning. Would you care to fill me in?"

Just then, George looked around and asked, "Where's Lee?"

... --- ...

Still disillusioned and scared witless, Lee remained perfectly still as the dozen Death Eaters appeared ready to chase after Harry and Moody. Moments later another twenty appeared. They searched inside the house and looked carefully around the back garden.

Moments later Lucius Malfoy appeared in the front yard, found Dolohov and said, "There were raids at several other homes. Apparently Potter and his friends were behind this. The ministry Aurors never would have gotten in and out so quickly. Gorky was mortally wounded but managed to tell us that a small raiding party of three or four was there initially. He remembered hearing three apparation pops and was hit a few seconds later."

"Come see this," yelled one of the Death Eaters from the back garden. Lucius and Dolohov went around to the back. Seeing his chance, Lee activated the portkey and found himself standing next to a very worried looking Fred and George.

... --- ...

George saw Lee appear, grinned and asked, "What took you so long?"

Lee said, "I got thrown into the bushes when those two Death Eaters rushed out the front. They must have gotten into a skirmish with Harry or the others. I waited a few minutes to get away and saw at least

thirty other Death Eaters appear. The only one I recognized was Lucius Malfoy. Some Death Eater name Gorky must have got killed. I left as soon as they walked away.”

Abraxan asked, “How many did you say?”

“Thirty. Most weren’t speaking English. I only recognized Lucius Malfoy, Minister”

Abraxan said, “Thank you for the interesting news. It’s Lee Jordan, correct?”

“Yes Minister.” Lee looked nervous.

“Lee, anyone who can evade and escape from thirty Death Eaters is more than welcome to be on a first name basis with me. Natasha. She shook his hand and smiled at him.

Lee broke into an infectious smile and replied, “Yes Minister.”

She shook her head slightly, smiled at him again and said, “Enjoy your day, Lee. Master Auror Moody were these illegal kidnappings your idea?”

“Yes Minister.”

She paused for a moment and inquired, “I take it there were more Death Eaters present than you expected at the last raid?”

“Yes Minister. Upon discovering that, I immediately called for backup which arrived within five seconds.”

“Mr. Potter, I take it that you and Mr. Chambers here were part of that backup?”

“Yes Minister.”

“Cadet Chambers, did the value of Mr. Potter’s previous lesson about moving quickly become apparent to you this morning?”

“Yes Minister.” He looked sheepish, but his answer was genuine.

“Mr. Potter do you have any thoughts regarding the sudden appearance of foreign born Death Eaters in Britain?”

“Yes Minister, I believe that they were recruited within the last month, most likely by Snape. His job would have become much easier after the Daily Prophet article regarding Riddle’s offer of a reward regarding Doctor and Doctor Granger.”

She looked at Hermione with some concern and replied, “Mr. Potter, I assume that you have them very safely hidden away somewhere?”

Harry replied, “Yes Minister.”

She smiled and replied, “Good. I believe that there were rewards offered for the capture of three of those scum. Who is to collect it?”

The grin left Harry’s face. He asked, “Will the person collecting it become a matter of public record?”

Abraxan replied, “Unfortunately that is the case.”

The last thing in the world Harry wanted was to put anyone in more danger. He asked, “If I were to collect it and find deserving people to give the gold to, would that be acceptable?”

Abraxan smiled and replied, “That would be a brilliant solution, Mr. Potter. You may stop by my office after breakfast if you wish. The reward for these three totals fifty thousand Galleons.”

Harry nodded and replied, “Thank you Minister. I’ll immediately pass it on to the appropriate people.”

“I know you will. Enjoy your breakfast Mr. Potter. I’ll see you at 9:00.” She looked at Hermione for a moment, thought of something, smiled and said, “Happy birthday, Miss Granger.”

Hermione beamed at her and replied, “Thank you Minister.”

... --- ...

Later that day Emma gripped Remus' arm a little tighter than she probably needed to as she felt the tug at her navel. It would not matter how many times she traveled by portkey, she would never get used to it. They landed in the alley behind the Crawly Connections Organization and she somehow managed to stay on her feet. Remus smiled as she let go of her death grip.

They came around the building and entered. Remus followed her without question as she led the way to the Psychological Services Bureau. She asked the receptionist to see Dr. Turnbull and waited. The girl behind the desk looked Emma up and down before picking up her phone.

"Who are you?" The young girl asked as she snapped her gum.

"Doctor Windsor," Emma said in a snooty voice.

A few minutes later a voice down one of the halls called out, "Your Highness!" Emma turned to see her best girl friend standing in her office door. She smirked.

"Dr. Turnbull. Do you, perchance, have a few moments for me?" Emma asked as if she expected nothing less. Diane was walking quickly towards her. They embraced. Diane looked her over with an eye only a psychologist had. She was not pleased with what she saw.

"Always, my friend, always." She turned to the receptionist and spoke, "Haley please hold all my calls unless it is an emergency." As they walked back toward Diane's little office, Emma introduced Remus.

"How are you?" Diane asked in a completely serious voice as soon as the door closed.

During normal periods of their married lives Emma and Diane usually spoke once a week. An extended weekday lunch or Sunday brunch after church was not uncommon. On more than one occasion they had created havoc on Harrods while their husbands played a round.

Emma had only spoken to Diane four times since June. The first just after their house had burnt to let her know that they were all right. The second was just after the wedding. The third was after the death threats on her husband were made. The fourth had been just yesterday to schedule an appointment. Emma thought about the lies that she'd told Diane.

"Honestly... I don't know," Emma admitted.

"I'll be outside," Remus told Emma. She nodded absently and he left the room.

"Can you take the rest of the day off?" Emma asked. Diane's eyebrows rose.

"That bad?" Diane asked. But Emma shook her head.

"No. I just have a lot of explaining to do. We're having a dinner for Hermione's birthday tonight. I know she would love to see you," Emma expressed.

"Isn't Hermione away at school?"

"Like I said. I have lots of explaining to do," Emma told her oldest girl friend. Diane's curiosity elevated. She'd been quite worried about her friends since their house had burnt down.

"I don't have anything pressing today and Jack is in the States for the next month on business."

"Thank you," Emma said in obvious relief.

Diane made a few phone calls and then locked her office door. She gave her pager to a colleague for emergencies but kept her cell phone. She followed Emma outside and was surprised when they entered the alley. She wondered where their vehicle was parked, but Emma stopped walking.

"Diane, do you trust me?" Emma asked. Diane blinked. They had been friends for years and were closer than most sisters.

“What kind of rubbish question is that?”

Emma swallowed hard. She knew that this would change their friendship. She didn't know how much though. She held up her hand displaying her wedding ring. Remus took her hand with his left one and then held on to Diane's arm.

“Put your hand on mine. Make sure you're touching my ring,” Emma said. Diane did as she was asked without question.

“Homefire,” Emma said.

Diane stumbled a bit as they landed but Remus managed to keep her on her feet. She looked around and then at Emma, her eyes huge.

“Lots of explaining,” Diane repeated when she finally found her voice. Remus chuckled and she turned to him in surprise.

“I'm sorry. I've never witnessed the first time a muggle saw magic before,” he said with a shrug. He held his hand out to Diane, “It was nice meeting you Dr. Turnbull. I hope to see you this evening. Seven O'clock?” He asked Emma.

Emma nodded and then motioned for Diane to follow her. They joined Dan who was in the library reading. Diane was shocked to see the picture on the front page of the newspaper moving.

Emma spent the next three hours talking. She started with magic being real. Emma described how she felt when they first saw Professor McGonagall do magic. Diane smiled at Hermione's excited reaction. She listened to Emma describe the Potter boy and the Weasley family. Emma was very proud of her daughter, and it showed when she talked about her school adventures. Diane could tell that her friend was also very scared. Diane became more afraid as Emma continued to speak.

Dan left when Emma mentioned a wedding and returned as Emma described the Order that they had joined. She was shocked that the

polite man who had accompanied Emma this morning was a werewolf.

When Emma finished speaking, Diane sat there utterly stunned. She didn't even blink when Dobby and Winky appeared and were introduced. After a minute she got out of her seat and grabbed Emma in a tight hug.

"How do you breathe?" Diane asked. Emma felt complete relief and hugged her friend back.

"Sometimes I can't," Emma admitted.

"My word... So all those crazy stories that my grandfather used to tell me were true," Diane said in wonder.

"What?" Dan asked in confusion. Diane laughed.

"My grandfather was ... I think you called it a squib? Mum told us that he was touched in the head," Diane said.

"Well, it certainly feels that way sometimes," Dan admitted.

After eating a divine lunch made by Winky, Diane asked a slew of questions to clarify what she had been told. After that they just talked.

About 2:00 Alyx joined them. She had the rest of the day off since she was to patrol the school that night. She retold the stories of her tattoos for Diane.

As always, Emma asked about how things were going at the school.

"They dueled in Defense today. Hermione went three for three. Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan both gave up before the first spell was fired then Moody made Lisa Turpin take a turn," Alyx said.

"How did it go?" Dan asked not wanting to think of his daughter in a duel.

"It was ugly. Lisa decided that she would... Would you like to see it? I have my pensive upstairs," Alyx said.

Diane had no idea what they were talking about but Emma agreed. Soon they were standing in the strangest classroom Diane had ever seen.

Diane was fascinated as she looked around. It was like standing inside a movie. Alyx started the memory.

Hermione and a girl who Diane thought must be Lisa Turpin were standing on a dais. Diane looked at Hermione. Her Goddaughter looked exhausted and Diane had never seen the expression on Hermione's face before. It was frightening. The teacher started the duel and nothing happened.

"I'll let you have the first shot," Hermione said in an even voice. Evenly cold. Diane shivered.

"Is that what Director Hammer told Ron? What about little baby Creevy? Did he tell them to take the first shot?" Lisa taunted. She continued, "Do you think that Dementor is enjoying ickle Ginevra? She probably gave it indigestion. Heart burn from all that red..."

Hermione moved her wand and didn't say a word. Lisa flew back fifteen feet and up five. She hit the wall with a sickening crunch and stuck there. Lisa's wand flew to Hermione who snapped it in half as she advanced on Turpin. Diane watched in shock as Lisa's mouth vanished.

"Funny is it? Do you hear yourself? Do you? I've listened to your shit all year. Stupid, irritating, mudblood. I don't bloody care what you call me. I never have, you irritating slag. I got lucky you stupid bitch; my family wasn't there when the Death Eaters torched our home. But my friends didn't! Dennis, Colin and Ginny are dead. Ron might as well be. Don't you ever speak of them like that again you unintelligent, foul, spiteful, nasty, bigoted, small minded little girl."

Hermione raised her wand again but a blonde girl, who moved like lightening, grabbed it from her hand.

"You've won, Hermione," the girl said.

"Give me my wand, Susan," Hermione snarled. She reached for it but Susan stood her ground.

"No. She's everything you said and more. But she's not worth it. I've lost my whole family Hermione. I don't want my new sister in Azkaban for murder," Susan said.

"I just thought that she might like down," Hermione said sweetly but Diane was not fooled. Apparently neither was Susan who pointed her wand at the wall and Lisa fell to the ground with a thud. Hermione took her wand back and turned towards her seat but the teacher stopped her.

He started yelling about her letting Lisa have the first shot. Hermione stood and took all of it with out flinching. When he was done she calmly sat down having not said a word. Then he turned to Lisa who was getting to her feet, helped by another girl who was wearing a uniform like hers. He stomped over to her, his wooden leg slamming on to the floor hard with each step. He grabbed her left arm and pulled up her sleeve.

"She's a student, not a Death Eater!" Moody turned on the class, his eye spinning wildly. He couldn't believe that anyone would have such a bigoted attitude.

Then they were back in the library. Emma ran from the room. Diane went to follow her but Dan stopped her.

"I've never seen Hermione like that before," Diane commented.

"It's been bad, Diane. Really bad. She's lost two of her best friends and she's up to her arse in this war. The man she is dating is the leader of the light side. He's under a lot of pressure. I'm so worried about both of them," Dan said.

"Man?" Diane asked shocked by that as much as anything she had heard or seen today. Dan sighed.

“He’s seventeen but more of a man than most forty year olds I know. This is his house. He let us stay here when it became apparent that we’d be targeted. He’s probably the only reason we’re alive.” He stopped as he saw his wife returning to the room. Dobby was following her with a potion.

“I’m fine Dobby. I got a little emotional,” Emma was objecting.

“Then I gives you a calming draught. Must go to Hogwarts to get. I’s be backs,” Dobby said excitedly. He popped out of the room before Emma could object. Dobby returned with Madame Pomfrey. Diane watched in fascination as Poppy scanned with her wand and then diagnosed without machines. Then Poppy gave Emma a lecture about her mental health. Diane raised an eyebrow at Emma who shook her head.

“No, Diane I’ve asked you here for professional reasons,” Emma commented.

“Professional?” Poppy asked.

Diane explained that she was a psychologist. Then she had to explain what a psychologist was. Alyx snickered and Diane turned to her frowning.

“Sorry. I was in therapy when I was a kid. Mum thought I was delusional because I thought I had magical powers,” Alyx told her.

Emma asked everyone to not say anything to Hermione or Harry. She didn’t want to add to their worries.

Alyx left to take a nap telling them that she had to be back at the castle before Harry and Hermione left. She hugged Emma telling her, “You take care of yourself or you’ll deal with me Auntie Em.”

Diane spent the rest of the afternoon professionally evaluating her friends on the sly. Diane had seen both of her friends in this state before. Emma had been an emotional mess when Dan had been called up for duty in the Falklands. Dan had been in a horrible way

just after Hermione was born. The birth had gone very badly and Emma almost lost her life.

Diane knew that there was nothing she could do except get them to talk out their feelings. Tonight would not be the night to do it.

Shortly after seven, four teenagers arrived. She watched as Dan and Emma hugged three of them. Hermione was holding on to Dan tightly when Diane came up behind her.

“Do I get one of them?” Diane asked. Hermione turned around slowly. Then Diane was enveloped in a shrieking bushy haired hug.

“Aunt Diane! I’ve missed you so much. What are you doing here?” Hermione asked in one long breath.

“I heard someone was having a birthday...”

Hermione laughed and then introduced her friends. Diane didn’t mention that she knew Susan’s name from the memory she had seen. Harry Potter looked to be all of the man that Dan had given him credit to be. The other boy, Neville, shyly shook her hand and then faded into the background.

It wasn’t long before Remus joined them along with Tonks.

Dinner was as wonderful as lunch had been. Diane discovered during dinner that not all magical people had the same skills. Tonks entertained them by doing impressions of each of them. She again explained what a psychologist was. Susan and Neville were both intrigued by the idea of a healer of emotions.

The conversation was not light for long. Tonks kicked Remus with her steel-toed muggle boots when he asked Harry about his meeting with Minister Abraxan. Hermione waved off the objections about it being her birthday.

“She was extremely pleased with the out come of the raids. Four captured and one or two killed,” Harry commented.

“Who’d they catch?” Emma asked.

“Travers, Flint, and two previously unknown men. Neither of them speaks English. Director Thomas is going to interrogate them.”

“Voldemort’s been recruiting. You’d think that with his recent record he would be having some trouble with that,” Dan mused. While Harry debated telling him his opinion on why Voldemort had been so successful recruiting Hermione spoke up.

“A hundred thousand Galleons is one Hell of an incentive, Dad,” she said flatly. Then she changed the subject. “Where is Uncle Jack?”

Diane explained his business trip and an uneasy silence fell over the table. Hermione picked at her food as she slouched in her seat. Diane watched Hermione.

After they finished their dinner Winky brought out a huge cake covered in lit candles.

“Where’s a fireman when you need one?” Harry teased.

“Are you calling me old Mr. Potter?” Hermione asked in the same tone that she used on Ron when he was being particularly thick. Harry just gave her his best smile.

“I can’t believe you’re eighteen! I swear it was just last week that I threw your mother the baby shower,” Diane told them. She looked at Emma and they both began to laugh.

“You can’t believe it. My little girl is all grown up,” Dan said when they finished and refused to tell them what was so funny.

“I’ll always be your little girl Daddy,” Hermione told him. She was tearing up a bit and hugged her father.

Diane noticed that Susan, Harry and Neville all looked away. She wondered about it. She turned to watch Hermione attempt to blow out the candles. After looking at the fire for a moment Hermione pulled out her wand and the waved it.

"It's good to be a witch sometimes," she said.

"Cheater," Emma grumbled good-naturedly.

After they each had a piece of delicious cake they retired to the living room so Hermione could open her presents. She opened a number of them from Order members who didn't know her very well. Her stack of books grew and grew. Dan and Emma had gotten her a pair of sapphire earrings that went well with her bracelet. Diane gave her a weekend at the spa. Susan had put together a photo album. Hermione looked at a few pages and then hugged the girl tightly. Neville gave her an ancient book. Potions of Ancient Earth by Salazar Slytherin. When Hermione saw it her eyes got huge.

"Neville! I can't accept this. It's worth a fortune," Hermione told him but Neville waived her off.

"I can't think of a better person to have it. My Mum was a potions mistress. You can use it and think of all the fun you had trying to teach me potions," Neville said smiling. Harry laughed and then handed her one last present.

"What's this?" She asked.

"Cleverest witch of your age? You should be able to figure it out, silly. It's your birthday present," he said smirking.

"But you already..." She fingered her bracelet.

She opened the box and gasped. Diane watched as Hermione pulled a pensive out of the box.

They took turns showing memories. Hermione put Neville in a full body bind. Harry and Ron late for transfiguration class. The end of the year feast with Neville winning the cup for Gryffindor. Hermione's first birthday. Harry and Ron taking polyjuice potion. Hermione smacking the crap out of Malfoy. Hermione winning an advanced debating contest. Hermione and Harry stealing and then riding

Buckbeak. Then it was Susan's turn and she eagerly put her wand to her temple. Then she hesitated.

"It's a happy memory but..."

"Go on," Harry encouraged.

Soon they were all standing in the Great Hall at Hogwarts. There were kids dressed formally all around them. The four teens looked around and Harry groaned loudly. Susan started the memory.

"Isn't he gorgeous?" Hannah asked looking over the four champions on the dance floor.

"Yes, he is," Ginny, said licking her lips.

"And she's beautiful," Susan told them.

"Of course she is. She's the pretty one and I'm the smart one," Padma told them. Hannah looked confused.

"I was talking about Victor," Hannah said. Ron snorted as he glared at the dancers.

"I was talking about Hermione," Susan told Padma.

"Well, I was talking about Harry," Ginny said watching him watch Cho.

"Hear that Longbottom? Your date's making eyes at someone else," Ron told him.

"Oh, you're one to talk. Your eyes haven't left Hermione since she got here," Padma snapped.

"Can you blame him?" Susan asked.

The memory ended and Harry grinned at Susan.

"Beautiful," he told her. She smiled a little looking a bit sad. Hermione put her arm around Susan's shoulder.

"It's good to remember them," Hermione said.

Remus decided that it was his turn then. He smirked and Hermione gave him a McGonagall look.

"That better not be my third year defense final," she said. He laughed loudly.

"No, but what a great idea," he answered.

Soon they were watching James Potter talking to baby Harry. He was completely serious.

"When you get older, son, you're going to fall in love with a witch just like your Mum. Brilliant and beautiful," he said. A young Remus snickered as he watched his friend give his one-year-old advice on women.

"Brilliant and beautiful! Ha! Try muggleborn and mad," a young and healthy Sirius said striding into the room.

"What's the matter Padfoot? Can't get rid of those fleas?" Remus asked.

"Sirius Black, you and your little friends stay away from my son!" Lily called from the other room.

"She's all four and she's all mine. And you, little man, are going to find one just like her," James said.

The memory ended. Harry grinned at Hermione.

"I didn't know my Dad was a seer," he told Remus.

Everyone laughed as Hermione chased Harry from the room. When they returned they were both tussled but a lot happier. Hermione sat in front of Harry and he wrapped his arms around her loosely. Diane was glad to see Hermione smiling and relaxing a bit.

No one got irritated until the teens went to leave. Emma was not happy about being told to stay in the house unless accompanied by a magical Order member. Neither was Dan. They brushed off the warnings but Diane saw through them. Her friends were scared.

... --- ...

Harry spent a good portion of Saturday in the hospital wing visiting with Luna and Neville. It seemed that the two of them were enjoying each other's company more and more. In groups of one or two, most of the Order came by to visit Luna and congratulate her. Tom Boyl had been responsible for killing many wizards and had taken particular pleasure in torturing muggles.

Of greater concern was the capture of the two newly marked Death Eaters at Travers' home. Neither one of them had spoken English, and they presented an unplanned risk. It had taken years to identify the others. Perhaps John Thomas would have some success interrogating Travers, Flint, and the two others.

Neville saw the look of concern on Harry's face when Luna flinched in pain as Poppy sat her up to take another potion. Poppy saw the same thing and stated, "Mr. Potter, Miss Lovegood is quite a strong young woman. She's neither fragile nor delicate. She will be up and around by Sunday evening. You can scold her then for not wearing her body armor. Until that time, I'm certain that you have other things to occupy your day. Please grant us all a favor and do them."

Harry knew how to take a hint, and went back to his room.

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Sunday morning there was a knock at Harry's door at seven. Hermione had uncharacteristically been up for an hour and was showered and dressed in faded jeans and a pink pastel sweater that looked really nice on her.

"Get up sleepy," she said, pounding on his door once before opening it. She had been up late finishing her homework and other research and had shooed him into his own room to get some rest. She leaned

over and gave him a kiss on the forehead. "Hurry up, we're leaving in twenty minutes."

"Huh?"

"You're taking me out for breakfast. Tonks, Alyx and Moody are joining us, so you'd better plan on buying," she said, smiling.

Knowing better than to argue, Harry showered and put on a sweater and a pair of black trousers over his body armor. He had a bad feeling about returning to Hogsmeade, and realized that it was the guilt that he hadn't saved more lives there. Five minutes later he met Tonks and Alyx by the front door. The women all looked fantastic. "Hi Harry," said Alyx.

"Wocher Harry," said Tonks smiling. "Moody said he'd meet us at the Three Broomsticks. No sense in him limping all the way up here just to turn around again."

"Hi Tonks, hi Alyx. You both look wonderful today," Hermione said, jabbing Harry in the side. They had obviously taken some time to prepare. Harry realized that he should have said something.

He did his best to recover. "Here I am with three beautiful women. It looks like my lucky day."

"You're training him pretty good Hermione," joked Tonks. "Keep working on him."

"He is turning out to be a long-term project," replied Hermione kissing Harry on the cheek.

"Hey..." said Harry, "I'm trainable." They laughed and started down the lawn, waving at Hagrid nursing his pumpkins as they got about halfway to Hogsmeade.

They made their way to Hogsmeade. It was a bright sunny crisp morning that would turn into a fine day as it warmed outside. They went into the Three Broomsticks and looked around. Moody was

there having a mug of coffee. Moody saw the look of surprise on Harry's face and replied, "I brewed it myself."

Harry smiled and said, "Good morning, Moody. It's good to see you."

Moody gave a softer than normal growl and replied, "You too Potter. Good morning you three."

Tonks smiled and said, "That's you Moody, salve and deboner."

Moody smiled at the compliment, while Hermione and Alyx bit their lips to keep from laughing.

As the pub was nearly empty, Harry cast a silencing charm and asked, "What went wrong at Boyl's?"

Moody replied, "The Lovegood girl knows her spells well enough. Lupin said that the wind came up just after the owl was released. She probably got exposed while getting hit by blowing leaves. The plan was fine. She should have had her vest on, but I expect that you'll bring that up sometime."

Harry nodded, recalling the fake Moody commenting about his knitted stockings at the fourth year ball. Glancing over for a moment, none of the witches appeared to be wearing their body armor.

Their breakfast came and was excellent as always. Harry, Hermione and Alyx ordered waffles while Tonks ordered fruit. Moody ordered the meat special. As they were finishing breakfast, Harry noticed the townspeople peeking over from time to time like someone would do in the presence of some sports hero or movie celebrity. Moody waited until Harry had picked up the check before reaching for his gold bag. Harry smiled, and said, "My treat today."

"Thank you Harry," sang the witches in unison sing-song. Harry smiled. Moody was so predictable.

They walked into the office of Folgard's Currency exchange. The proprietor stood up and said, "Good morning, "How can I help..." He

recognized Alyx and smiled warmly. "Alyx, good to see you. Kris and Mary miss visiting with you. They're upstairs. Who are your friends?"

"Hi Lenny. It's good to see you too. These are my friends Tonks, Hermione and Harry. Lenny let me stay at the flat above the building across the street when I was working in London. Kris and Mary would have me over for dinner every Sunday."

Folgard looked at the other two witches for a moment then at Harry. He said, "Thank you Mr. Potter. You and I'm now certain your friends helped save our village. We're so proud of Alyx being inducted into the Order of Merlin."

Alyx blushed and said, "Lenny, it seemed like Harry spent half of his time saving me. In a more serious tone she asked, "How are Mary and Kris?"

Lenny replied, "There's nothing that time and caring friends won't cure." Looking at Harry he asked, "This one's not available, is he?"

Alyx laughed and said, "No. Harry's well taken care of, you old matchmaker. I saw Emily Thursday. She misses you and her sisters."

Harry put the two together smiled and said, "I've met her. She joined my beginner defense group. She's a spunky little witch." Based on the reports he'd heard, he suddenly had a lot more respect for the little girl who'd shot Crabbe and Goyle to save her sisters."

Lenny smiled and said, "Kris and Mary miss her so. They send owls back and forth all of the time. Mr. Potter, your grandfather set me up in business twenty-five years ago. He took great pride in helping others get started. I wish he could have known the man his grandson has become. You may not know this, but many of the businesses within Hogsmeade owe their starts to him."

Harry didn't know that and was happy to hear something about his parents or grandparents.

Alyx said, "I'm going to run up to see Mary and Kris for a few minutes." Winking at Hermione, she said, "I'll meet you at the bookstore."

As they were walking down the street they received a few stares. A young boy, about nine pulled his mum along and said, "See I told you."

The young mother smiled at them and apologized saying, "I'm sorry for bothering you, Steve was just so excited."

Steve said, "Thank you Ma'am. You helped save me that night in the castle."

Hermione remembered the boy who'd had the leg so badly cut the night of the attack. She beamed and gave him a hug, and said, "You're very welcome. I'm glad to see you up and around."

They made their way into the bookshop. Once inside, Harry gave Hermione a squeeze on the arm and said, "You're my hero every day. I love you."

She kissed his cheek, and said, "Same here." She pulled him into a hug and they held each other for a long time. They were interrupted by a tap on the shoulder and looked up to see Alyx smiling at them.

"C'mon you two. Let's do some shopping."

Chapter 20

Harry received the visit from Minister Abraxan about 7PM. She handed him a length of rope that had been spelled to create a wand-activated portkey.

Abraxan looked tired but upbeat. The information had taken nine days of tirelessly going from likely house to house and lives had been lost in the search. An unknown wizard fitting Snape's description had used the killing curse on two policemen who had come across him in a residential neighborhood in Cobham. Snape, who now fancied himself as a muggle expert, had killed the pair who had come to the house claiming to be checking on a reported gas leak.

Harry's question brought Abraxan's attention back to the meeting at hand. She replied, "If our plan is successful, you will get a call about 9AM to go. Activate the portkey, get in and get out as quickly as you can. We can only promise that he'll be gone a minimum of five minutes. It might be longer, but you'll want to be gone by the time he gets back. What we can't promise is that the house will be empty."

Harry asked, "Do you have any idea of how many Death Eaters might be there?"

She gave the best answer that she could. "If he's running the dark side anywhere near the way we believe, there probably are less than five people who live there. What there would be is a steady stream of people coming and going to report on different activities or plans. The snake might be inside or it might be outside, we don't know and the observer who is watching the house doesn't specifically know what to look for in case she is captured. She simply is calling in to report what she sees and is watching for magical signatures."

Harry nodded hoping that she would say more. After a moment, she continued, "I have other people continuing to look around so that there is no indication that we have found what we're looking for. We're not absolutely certain that this is the house, but have a high confidence that it is. Lucius Malfoy, Antonin Dolohov and Severus Snape have been seen apparating from the back garden."

Harry nodded.

She continued. "The portkey will take you to the side of the house. I recommend blasting your way through the back door and having at least ten people with you as well as medical backup available. You'll want emergency medical assistance ready. Healer Pomfrey can arrange that. While the house itself would be extremely tempting to search, I recommend that you either leave it intact or torch it as you leave. I hope that you're successful Mr. Potter. I don't think you'll have a better opportunity."

Harry was extremely grateful for the information. He finally responded, "I'll call you by ten."

She said, "It would be better for both of us if you didn't ask any other questions, Mr. Potter. Good luck." She opened the door and quickly walked up to the floo in McGonagall's office.

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An hour later, Remus, Arthur, Minerva, Bill, Justin, Susan, Hermione, Poppy, Flitwick, Kingsley, Neville, Lee, Fred, and George, along with Alyx, Gunner, Chambers, Bradley, Tonks, and Moody were assembled in the defense classroom.

Harry felt good about the people who he had called on for the raid. He said, "I have information that Riddle will be away from his hideout at 9:00 tomorrow morning. A spotter is in place to give us the word. It is a house with a large garden so there is every possibility that the snake will be outside hunting. The snake can communicate with Riddle, though I don't know of the distance or circumstances."

"How big is it?" asked Justin with no trace of arrogance on his voice.

"Bigger than a boa. I'd reckon about twelve feet long. I've shown the photo that I had of the snake to Hagrid. He thought it might be a diamondback that had been given several engorgement charms."

"At least that," replied Arthur, who had much more experience with that particular snake than he wanted.

“Since it’s some type of venomous snake, you’ll need to be extra careful. I’ll make some sacks that you could carry it in. I’d guess that it would weigh almost a hundred pounds,” said Minerva.

“Harry, what’s your plan for the grab?” asked Kingsley.

“I’d like to have six people searching outside and nine inside. I’d like to stun the snake and bring it back. We can deal with it here.” Harry realized that his idea added complexity to the plan, but he wanted to pick his time to destroy the horcruxes.

He continued, “Moody you’ll need to look the house over as quickly as you can and give us an idea of how many Death Eaters are in there. I was told to expect up to a handful of Death Eaters on the premises. Hopefully they’ll be inside.”

Justin was going to ask where Harry got his information but noticed a scathing look from Professor McGonagall and thought better of it.

Harry continued. “It’s critical that we don’t linger there. We want to eventually fight Riddle on our terms, not in his house. Avoid touching anything that you don’t have to. Wear your armor and stay alert. We’ll meet at the Hogsmeade station shelter at 8:30.”

“Why not go earlier?” asked Bill.

“I don’t know how she plans to get him out of the house,” replied Harry, not sure that he really wanted to know.

Hermione took a breath and said, “Harry, Susan and I would like to go with. If two more people searching gets everyone away from there even ten seconds earlier it will be worth it.”

Harry was about to refuse when Moody spoke up and said, “They volunteered the same as everyone.”

Harry considered his words for a moment and replied, “OK. Eleven inside, six outside.” He looked at Healer Pomfrey and asked, “How many healers would you like on standby?”

Poppy replied, "Two healers and four aides."

Minerva replied, "I'll notify Arabella. Arthur, can you talk with Molly?"

Poppy glanced at Arthur and replied, "Hooch is available." Molly needed some time off and she didn't feel the need to announce it. Fortunately, Minerva let it go, and the matter was dropped.

Harry concluded the meeting, saying, "We'll meet at Hogsmeade station by 8:30 ready to go. Enjoy the rest of your evening. Thank you and good luck."

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They got back to their room before Harry spoke to Hermione. He closed the door, sealed it then turned to her. Before he could say a word, she cut him off and said, "I know that wasn't what you wanted, but thank you for respecting our wishes. Let's let it go at that and get a good night's sleep." She opened her bedroom door, drew down the covers and asked, "Are you coming?"

Harry took a quick shower and returned to her room. She lifted the covers inviting him in and said, "I'm chilled. Will you hold me and keep me warm?"

"A gentleman would never refuse a request from a beautiful lady." Harry was mad that Hermione hadn't asked him in private but he didn't want to start a fight with her, not now.

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They awoke about five, showered and went over their plans again. Hermione would stand just inside the back door with Susan calling out the time in thirty-second intervals while Susan had the phone connection with the healers at Hogsmeade. There would be no backup team.

Alyx, Gunner, Chambers, Bradley and Arthur would search outside and Moody would be on the lookout for Death Eaters apparating onto the grounds.

Remus, Bill, Justin, Kingsley, Neville, Fred, George, Lee and Harry would search the house. Lee, Fred and George would search the cellar. Kingsley, Neville and Harry would search the main level while Remus, Bill and Justin searched the upper level. Whoever found the snake would stun it twice and the other two would bag it up.

Harry and Hermione held hands as they went to the Great Hall a few minutes before it opened. Harry had expected his relationship to be the subject of constant gossip within the school, but had been pleasantly surprised. Perhaps it was the deaths of those that they counted as friends, or perhaps it was the nearness of the war. With the exception of a few jealous individuals like Turpin, the overall maturity level within the school had risen noticeably since the previous year.

The Order members who resided at the school soon joined them. At meals they had been taking turns moving from table to table, no longer just Gryffindors or Ravenclaws, rather members of a light side brought together by the unprecedented participation in the DA group. Minerva may have been headmistress, but for all intents and purposes Hogwarts had become the home of Potter's army.

At 7:45 they rose as one and went to their rooms to get the rest of their equipment. The rest of the school noticed their departure, but most had the decency to wait until they had left to begin their chatter.

... --- ...

As Harry and Hermione were having breakfast, Dan slipped out the back door of the brownstone rowhouse mansion and walked to his BMW to drive to the store in order to collect the morning newspapers and at least pretend that he had some control of his life. It was a small routine that he liked doing each morning. He was quite surprised and somewhat frightened to walk out of the little newsstand and see a very serious looking man and a woman standing by his car. The woman said, "Dr. Granger, please step into your car."

... --- ...

Harry and the others arrived at the Hogsmeade station a few minutes after eight. Within ten minutes everyone had arrived. They looked like a bunch of witches and wizards that were waiting for the train under the shelters trying to stay out of the chilling rain. They sat quietly, lost in their own thoughts trying to minimize their own stress. Harry had said his words about staying alert, focused and getting out quickly and safely.

There were two groups - the strike force and the healers. The healers were quietly waiting for the others to leave before they set up for the possibility that one or more of the strike force would return badly wounded or worse.

... --- ...

Three hundred miles to the south a man apparated to the country estate, passed the guards who were at the front, hurried to the upstairs library, knocked at the door, said something to the man in the room and knelt down. The other man walked into the next room and said, "Master, Gorgan has found him."

Riddle's snakelike eyes flashed with a gleam that Malfoy couldn't recall seeing before. He simply asked, "Where?"

"At their Surgery in Crawley. Gorgan saw their car and is there."

"Outstanding Lucius. Let us go and greet them." Malfoy was almost as anxious to avenge their defeats as Riddle was and hurried to catch up to the Dark Lord.

They walked down the stairs and Riddle said, "It's time to avenge Bella. Come."

... --- ...

Four hundred yards from Riddle's house, a young witch pressed the talk button on her cellular telephone. "Minister, I just measured six disappearations... Yes, I'm positive... I don't know... Yes Minister."

Abraxan wasn't proud of her actions, but knew that victory would only come at a price. She pressed the numbers on the keypad, pressed the talk button, and said, "Good luck. Go now."

... --- ...

They all held their hand on the length of rope. Harry tapped his wand on the rope and said the activation word, Frisbee. A moment later they all were standing on the side of the manor home in Cardiff. They took a quick look around and saw no one on the grounds. Moody began examining the house through the walls and saw the unclear images of at least three people within the home. They decided to rush the house from both the front and the back door at the same time.

"Thirty seconds," hissed Hermione in a low voice.

Kingsley, Neville, Harry, Remus, Bill and Justin would rush the front door while Lee Fred and George would rush through the back.

"Go!"

... --- ...

Voldemort, Snape, Lucius, Draco, Dolohov and Dansk didn't even try to conceal their movements. Rather they apparated directly into the lobby of the medical building only to find that Gorgan had murdered the lobby receptionist. As they were walking to the elevators two old women had the unfortunate luck to come in through the side doors.

Snape murdered them both without a moment's thought. Looking at the lobby directory he said, "They are on the fifth floor. Suite 530."

"Snape, stay down here with Dansk. Seal the doors and see to it that we're not disturbed."

... --- ...

Abraxan sat in her office hoping that she hadn't just sent the light side to their deaths. As calmly as she could she waited for the reports and hoped that the lives lost were overwhelmingly those of the Death Eaters.

Her cellular telephone rang and she heard the whispered voice of the spotter saying, "Sixteen witches and wizards just arrived together. I don't think they're Death Eaters."

Abraxan's reply was, "They're on our side." Put more precisely, most of the British wizarding world was on their side.

... --- ...

Riddle opened the door and saw the two at the front desk looking at the odd looking box that was giving off light. The name badges on their white uniforms read Dan Granger DDS and Emma Granger DDS. Before they could look up, he'd pointed his wand at the man and said "Crucio. Crucio."

The man and woman were on the floor screaming. Within moments they'd stained their white uniforms first with urine, then feces, finally with blood.

Riddle let up his wand for a moment, and said, "Dr. Granger, how would you like to see your lovely wife raped then tortured, then disemboweled before your eyes?" Even the other Death Eaters were chilled by his words.

The man tried to scream but the silencing charm that Lucius had placed on him prevented more than a muffled sound to escape.

Riddle nodded and Dolohov carefully cast a purple flame emasculating the man but leaving him very much alive.

Riddle was ecstatic and gave a hideous smile. He reached down and said, "Here's something for your lovely wife to remember you by. He walked over to the woman and said, "Now open wide, this won't hurt me a bit."

The terror in her muted scream made him laugh loudly. The sound chilled everyone in the room.

He watched her silently beg him and the power he felt increased. Her life was in his hands. It would be ending very soon, but not without a lot of pain first.

He grabbed her jaw.

... --- ...

Fred tossed a modified package through the back door after Lee and George had banished the door. The putrid smell of the modified WWW trick wafted around the room making every live thing in the room unconscious. Three plants by the windows wilted into brown fragile leaves in an instant. A bubblehead charm each and they ran into the room. They found the stairway to the cellar. Being the most worldly of the trio in the matters of muggle technology, Lee flipped the switch and the stairway light went on. As they were going down the stairs they heard the unmistakable sound of a firefight going on over on the other side of the house.

... --- ...

Hermione and Susan took their places by the banished doors. Susan banished the nasty smelling gas and kept an eye on the door at the other end of the room. In one hand she held a cell phone with an open line to the healers, in the other she held her wand. Her wand never faltered.

Hermione crouched in the doorway with her wand drawn and her eyes on her watch.

She shouted, "One minute."

... --- ...

Bill and Remus blew the front door off of its hinges with one Reducto each. Bill was through the door before the debris had settled. There was one Death Eater near the other end of the entranceway.

Bill fired a stunner at the Death Eater just as he'd cast a cutting hex that narrowly missed Remus. Harry dropped him with a Reducto blast that painted the man's intestines across the wall. Justin flinched at the brutality of the move until he was jarred back to the moment by Bill pointing him to the stairs saying, "Check the rooms on the right side of the hall. Remus will check the ones on the left, and I'll watch the hallway. Stay alert.

... --- ...

Outside Alyx and Arthur were running up and down the grounds searching for the snake on the cold day. The grass was longer than the Dursleys would have allowed and it would certainly be possible for the snake to go into hiding anywhere in the large back garden.

Arthur's heart was pounding so hard that he could hear blood rushing in his ears. He remembered very clearly his last run-in with the snake. He could not keep up with Alyx, so he started searching in a cross pattern.

Something moved in the taller grass near where Alyx was jogging. Arthur saw that she was looking the other way and shouted a warning. Arthur raised his wand aimed at the moving grass. Alyx turned just as something jumped from the brush.

...---...

Chambers and Bradley were standing by the side of the house when a Death Eater apparated inches away from Chambers. By a miraculous bit of luck Bradley pushed him over and Chambers stunned him. Moody walked over and hit him with a Reducto blast to the face.

Chambers took the wounded man's wand and snapped it. They left the Death Eater there, his life bleeding into the grass.

Then they heard Arthur shout Alyx's name.

...---...

Riddle watched Draco work. The boy's technique was sloppy. He would kill the filthy muggle man if he didn't calm down. Maybe he was upset that he couldn't rape the wife too.

Another chunk of flesh tore from Dan's back. Riddle stopped Draco for a moment and gave him a bit of advice. Draco's next try left a fine line on the small area of the back that still had skin. The line split open slowly and Riddle nodded to Draco in approval.

... --- ...

Neville raced from room to room on the main floor finding nothing in the kitchen, dining room, bathroom, closets or the family room. Harry was having no better luck on his side of the first floor.

Harry rushed from the library and raised his wand at the figure that burst from the bathroom.

"Red..." he shouted stopping himself just in time. Neville looked relieved as he was also lowering his wand. They both took off running again after a few seconds.

... --- ...

Fred, George and Lee finished their search of the cellar. Based on the torn clothing and blood it was obvious that Riddle or the Death Eaters had been torturing and killing people down there. Fred opened a large cabinet carefully keeping his wand ready. The tools he found in the cabinet were caked in blood. One of them had a long leathery ribbon of material hanging from it. He vomited when he realized that it was not material.

The three men rushed back to the bottom of the stairs. They blew the tool cabinet up from there.

They had not found any bodies or the snake.

... --- ...

“Ninety seconds,” Hermione barked.

Susan shouted a stunning hex into the room and Hermione looked up from her watch. The girl who had become her sister in so many ways was still looking into the room with a wary eye.

“I saw something,” Susan told her. Hermione’s eyes returned to her watch trusting Susan completely.

... --- ...

Arthur shouted a blasting hex as Alyx ducked and rolled away from the creature that had jumped from the grass. Bradley and Chambers came running around the house with Moody in pursuit. The hex missed the rabbit as it hopped away.

Alyx stood up and immediately continued her search. She found four more rabbits. It told her that the snake was probably not in the back garden. She didn’t become any less careful.

... --- ...

Draco held the muggle on his knees with his wand. He had struggled against the sticking charm that held his knees to the floor at first. After the skin around his kneecaps had given way, Draco reapplied the charm. This time the Death Eaters could see his muscles pulling as he tried to get up and run.

The woman was in a full body bind, face first on the floor. Her clothing was long gone except for her name pin which Dolohov had affixed though the skin on her back. Dolohov was carefully carving a greeting for Potter and his mudblood into the woman’s back. She was conscious, but unable to make a sound or move.

When he finished the greeting, Dolohov released her from the binding curse. He immediately grabbed her by the throat. He laughed, his face inches from hers and said, “My turn again.”

The Dark Lord watched as Lucius finished removing the man's front teeth with the muggle tools that Dolohov had found in one of the other rooms. Blood rushed from the man's mouth. Lucius hadn't bothered to administer Novocain.

Voldemort laughed as Lucius began to remove his lower robes again.

... --- ...

"Got em," cried Remus. "Bill help me."

"Avada Kedavra." A jet of light flew out and hit Justin.

Bill raced into the room and blew the closet door of Voldemort's bedroom open. A second Reducto blast finished off the dying Death Eater.

...---...

"Two minutes," Hermione shouted. She watched nervously as Alyx and her group searched the tall grass and then her eyes returned to her watch. She and Susan both jumped when the door to the basement burst open.

Fred, George and Lee shook their heads at them as they recovered from almost being blasted into the next big adventure. They started towards the stairs.

... --- ...

Harry raced up the stairs only to run into Bill carrying the limp form of Justin Finch-Fletchley. Bill said, "Remus needs some help."

Harry found Lupin who had finished stuffing the giant snake into the sack. Remus asked, "Justin?"

"Dead."

Lupin thought for a moment and said, "As much as this place might tell us..."

Harry finished his sentence, saying, "We need to go." In a much louder voice he shouted, "Everybody out."

Remus levitated the heavy bag in front of them as they pounded down the stairs.

... --- ...

"Two and a half minutes." She heard Harry's order and repeated it knowing that everyone was supposed to be listening for her voice. She faltered as Bill came out carrying Justin's body.

...---...

Harry reached the front of the door with everyone outside. Moody did the headcount and said "Everyone's here."

Pop, pop.

"Reducto." Hermione marveled at Harry. He had cast a spell before it even connected in her mind that there were suddenly two Death Eaters in the yard.

"Avada Kedavra." The second one fired.

"Duck, Thomas." Harry pushed the overly stiff cadet out of the way and onto the ground.

"Stupefy." Alyx hit the Death Eater.

Harry wasn't taking chances and cast "Reducto." The Death Eater's head exploded. "Let's get... wait. Wait. Flame the house."

They went to different points around the house while Fred and George raced inside for a moment and cast, "Inflambre."

Hermione looked at her watch and shouted, "Three minutes."

Giving the scene one last look, Harry shouted, "Let's go."

Seconds later, they had all disappeared.

... --- ...

The witch who had been observing through a pair of omnioculars spoke into her cellular telephone. "They're carrying something out in a canvas sack and one of the raiding party was killed or wounded. There are several Death Eaters outside. It looks like they were killed. They just finished torching the house... Yes Minister. Right away."

She apparated back to the Ministry and handed the pair of omnioculars to Abraxan. The Minister of Magic knew what she had to do and said, "Thank you, Randi. Thank you very much. Director Thomas is going to escort you over to St. Mungo's then bring you back here tomorrow morning. We'll talk some more then."

"Thank you Minister. Just so you know, they did well."

Thomas took her over to St Mungo's where Professor Steve Light obliterated the memory of the last week from her mind.

... --- ...

Headmistress McGonagall asked, "What happened?"

Bill answered before Harry. "He was snooping around in Voldemort's bedroom. Some Death Eater had been hiding in one of the closets and hit him with the killing curse."

They were all standing in the Hogsmeade shelter. Poppy went to her box of supplies and pulled out a black body bag. Bill and Gunner carefully put Justin down. The Master Healer examined him for a moment, smoothed his hair once and closed the bag around him. She called St. Mungo's and released the two Mediwitches who had been on standby. Kingsley signed as the witness on the death certificate.

Minerva conjured a stretcher then Susan and Hooch floated the body back up to the castle.

Harry thanked everyone and they drifted off. Remus carried the canvas bag into the castle and put it in a locked container in the room where Harry did his training.

He was delighted at the results, but sickened at the cost.

... --- ...

Forty minutes later in a medical building in Crawley, Riddle was just beginning to have fun. He had personally raped the woman in front of the man's bulging eyes. She hadn't given him the proper respect and for that he'd allowed his followers to each have their way with her. Dolohov had finished his third go only seconds before, saying that he'd had to take Draco's turn.

Draco, unable to rape her, had violently beaten both of the muggles promising that he would do worse to their daughter when he was given the chance.

Lucius had taken great pleasure in cutting off the man's fingers while Draco had watched in some state of perverse ecstasy. Both of the Malfoy men had been practicing with knives for just this occasion. It showed in the wounds on both of the doctors.

Draco examined the muggles and their injuries with glee. He hoped that he would be able to pull the memory of finding their bodies from the mudblood's mind. He wanted to feel the younger Granger's terror and horror.

The mudblood's mother was bruised from head to toe, or she would have been had her toes still been attached. She had been raped five times and blood was pooling around her body as she was dying slowly from her wounds. The man next to her on the floor had more broken bones that seemed possible. All of the skin on his back was missing and Draco's use of a knife had left him flayed open in many places.

Their blood pooled together mixing under her sobbing body. The dying man tried to cry but lacked the energy.

It happened as Riddle and his Death Eaters were taking a break before finishing them off. Emma Granger's battered face thickened and her bloodied brown hair shrank and turned into a blond crewcut.

A moment later the features of the two newest recruited foreign-born Death Eaters came into view. Their careers as Death Eaters had lasted less than a month.

The glass in every window within the building shattered. Riddle, spat out the words, "Potter did this." They apparated to the lobby, collected Snape and Dansk, then apparated back to Riddle's house.

... --- ...

Voldemort, Snape, Lucius, Draco, Dolohov, Dansk and Gorky apparated back to Riddle's house to find a fire that had nearly burned itself out. Before he could exhale, Gorky was on the ground writhing under the effect of the Cruciatus. In reality, Riddle couldn't hold the spell for long, but his anger was as intense as could be. After a minute he let it up and said, "I will let you live. You had no way of knowing that those two weren't the mudblood's parents. Do not fail me again. You will never speak of this to anyone."

Gorky took a few steadying breaths and in a weak voice replied, "Thank you Master." All in all, he wished that he could be Obliviated.

Riddle didn't want to remain here any longer than he needed to and ordered, "Lucius, collect the gold from the ruins of the house. The rest of you look around to see what might be salvaged. Where is Nagini?" Riddle tried the link that he had with the excessively large diamondback but couldn't easily make a connection.

Dansk and the others looked around for a moment and he came back a moment later, saying "Master, there is a note that was left over there." He pointed to a small rock some fifty feet away from the house. The Dark Lord reached down and picked it up. The envelope read Tom Riddle.

Lucius and Dolohov knew enough to stay away from the hurricane that was developing. Draco was walking over to see, but Dolohov pulled the teen back. The rock exploded, ripping through Dansk like a shotgun at close range.

The note that Regulus Black had left in the locket fluttered to the ground in ashes.

... --- ...

An hour later the two dentists and Minister Abraxan finished their conversation. "Thank you for your co-operation Doctor and Doctor Granger. I'm certain that your daughter and Mr. Potter have tried to impress on you the need to stay concealed and safe in the recent past." She looked at Dan and said, "Dr. Granger, if we could find you, the Death Eaters could too. Two people whom the Death Eaters believed were you and your wife were tortured and killed by Voldemort and his killers this morning. Your daughter needs you both to be alive, healthy, and happy, and Mr. Potter needs your daughter feeling the same way. Please don't fail them."

Dan looked as embarrassed as he felt and simply said, "We're sorry."

Abraxan replied, "Doctor Granger, your automobile is known to the Death Eaters. Please accept this one to use. She handed him the keys to a white Audi that was parked behind his car. It was completely indistinct, and Dan hated it, but understood the reasoning behind the choice. She cast her wand over Dan's BMW, picked up the shrunken car and said, "Your daughter or Mr. Potter will know how to set this back for you once it is safe. Enjoy your day, Doctor and Doctor Granger. Please go back to the place where Mr. Potter asked you to stay."

They started to walk to the car when she said, "Please wait a moment. I have something for you."

An hour later, Dan and Remus entered the Royal Armory. Dan presented his paperwork that John Thomas had given him to the clerk and came out twenty minutes later with three boxes. One

contained a new Colt model 1991 .45 automatic pistol. It was similar to the one that Harry had loaned him – the original style .45 with the straight grip. The only thing unusual about the pistol is that it had no serial number on the frame.

The second box contained five spare magazines and a shoulder holster. The magazines had been hand fitted for the pistol with special attention that the feeder lips worked perfectly with that specific pistol minimizing the chance of a stovepipe jam.

The last box was wooden and heavy. It was marked 45ACP Hardball. The only thing unusual about the little crate of ammunition was that the individual cases had no head stamp. Dan had never owned a pistol of his own before, and wasn't certain that he was happy that he did, given the circumstances that led to his receiving a license to own and carry the pistol.

Somehow he kept the faith that this was a very temporary situation and sooner or later, he would get his life back.

... --- ...

Fear and rage swept through Riddle. How did he know? How did he find out, or did he? What has he found?

Riddle mentally cataloged the Horcruxes - His first had been the diary. He had told Lucius to keep it safe and the man had stupidly given it to that little girl. Her parents might still have it. The putter was foolishly left in the chamber of secrets while he was a student. He couldn't access it, but had no reason to believe that it had been found. Salazar's ring had been hidden in Gaunt's house. He would check on it later. The locket was on the island hidden by the wall and the lake. The cup had been kept in Malfoy manor and he didn't know the whereabouts of it. Nagini was missing. Had she slithered away to escape the fire or had she been the reason that they'd been drawn away?

He put those thoughts away for a moment and said, "We will meet at Dolohov's cottage tonight at nine.

... --- ...

Within the span of an hour Riddle came to the conclusion that his years of developing the protection that would provide him immortality had come close to failing him due to several miscalculations on his part. Salazar Slytherin's ring was not under the rock outside the ruin of his Grandfather's home. He had hidden it so carefully. The gold Hufflepuff cup had gone missing when the Malfoy manor had been torched. At the time he hadn't thought to collect it before the ministry began picking through the house. No living person knew that he'd embedded a sixteenth of his soul into the cup. He would collect the putter in a few days when the castle lay in ruins. If Black had found the locket and substituted a copy that Potter, no Dumbledore had found ... Suddenly the puzzle came into focus. Snape would know what the old man had been up to in the months preceding his death. He would find the two largest pieces and relink them to his body. Later on, he could resplit them again.

He would concern himself with that problem later. It was nearly time to meet his army.

... --- ...

Tuesday evening Harry asked Emily Folgard to stay after the DA class. The girl reminded him of Ginny. She had a lot of spunk, tried hard at each move that he showed her and had a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

When the others had left Harry said, "I met with your dad and sisters a few days ago."

Emily misinterpreted his words thinking that she'd been caught sneaking her broom into the castle said, "I'll send it back."

Surprised, Harry asked, "What?"

"My broom. I know I'm not supposed to have it here. I'll send it back."

Smiling, Harry replied, "Hermione and I will be happy to keep it for you if you want. I just wanted to tell you that Kris and Mary said to say hi. You're not in any trouble."

Comprehension dawned on the little witch. "I'm... Forget I said anything about a broom, OK?" She turned and left with Harry smirking as she walked out the door.

... --- ...

There were six girls gathered in the potions classroom when Professor Slughorn crept in. He stood silently in the back of the room, hidden in the shadows, as he watched the Head Girl tutor four of her housemates and Miss Bones. This was not the first time he had observed the brilliant young lady teaching. He had mentioned to the Headmistress that after he retired she should seriously consider Miss Granger as his replacement.

The kids were finishing up a discussion on the basic principles of ingredient preparation. Miss Granger was explaining why certain ingredients had to be processed in certain ways. It was all material that Snape should have covered in the first term of their first year.

He waited until they were gathering their books until he presented himself.

"Miss Granger, may I have a moment of your time?" He had asked her politely. He didn't want to offend the girl. He wasn't sure why she was so different from the previous year. She no longer came to Slug Club meetings. She also no longer participated in class the way she used to. When he asked the other professors about their experiences with her he found that his class was the only one that she was no longer active in.

Slughorn was no fool. If Miss Granger survived the war she could very well become the first muggleborn Minister of Magic. It unnerved him that he had thought the same thing about Lily Potter. Of all the students that Horace had taught, Lily had been one of his favorites. She and Snape had been study partners for the first six years of their

education. How Snape and Lily had ended up on opposite sides of the light and enemies was beyond him.

He watched Wendy Williams, Erin Erickson, Allie and Katlyn Greystone and Susan Bones all leave the room. He gave them a small smile.

"How may I help you Professor?" Miss Granger asked in a polite but distant tone of voice.

"I have been watching you tutor some other students Miss Granger. I'm quite impressed. Are you aware that Greystone's grades have gone up two letters in the past month?" he asked.

"She mentioned that potions has gotten easier," Hermione admitted. In reality, she was quite proud of them all.

"Yes, I suppose knowing the basics does help. Why didn't she learn them first year?" Slughorn asked.

"Snape never bothered to teach the fundamentals or theory. He just threw the ingredients on the board and demanded that we complete the potion," Hermione said with a shrug. "His favorite students had all been tutored on the basics before they even started school, and he wouldn't help the others." She glanced at her watch. She had about ten minutes to get across the castle to her meeting.

"We've missed you at Slug Club meetings. Will you be joining us Saturday afternoon?" he asked.

"I doubt it Professor. I'm having trouble keeping up with my classes and all the head girl responsibilities, but thank you for the invitation," she said. She again glanced at her watch.

"I apologize for keeping you Miss Granger. If you find the time please join us," he said stepping aside to let her pass.

Hermione left the dungeon quickly. She threw a quick charm on her bag so that she could lift it easily. Then she placed a ward around her shoes. She started walking very quickly. She knew he was following

her after he tripped the ward charm the third time. She headed for her room instead of the room of requirements. She had a house elf take a note to the group that was waiting on her.

Harry's cloak helped her get there only ten minutes late. The room was set up like the dining room in Crawly again. She noticed that her mum was not sitting in the seat that she had claimed as her own in their house.

When she entered the room she still had that cloak on. Everyone had noticed the door open. Four of the group had their wands out. She smiled knowing that Moody would be proud.

"Sorry I'm late," she said taking the cloak off. She hugged Emma who smiled brightly but fake as could be. Hermione understood the feeling.

"What did Slughorn want?" Susan asked.

"To know why I gave up my membership in the Slug Club," Hermione answered with a shrug. She would tell Harry later about him following her.

"We are here tonight to discuss Inperi. Padma what do you have for us?" Hermione asked pulling a muggle notebook and pen out of her bag.

"The Inperi. Most people think that they are mythological ramblings of people who were terrified in the last war. There were very few sightings of them. Only one by a credible source," Padma began.

"Can we question the source?" Susan asked. Padma shook her head and gave Susan a sympathetic smile.

"Amelia Bones was the only credible source. Her story was indistinct at best. She saw them from a distance and had been hurt badly in battle at the time."

"That was September 1981," Padma said.

"The battle at Ottery St. Catchpole," Molly said with a frown.

"Yes. You-Know-Who only used them twice that we know of. Ottery St. Catchpole and an unconfirmed attack on a muggle orphanage near London in August of that year. It was unconfirmed because no one was left alive. Inferi were suspected because the victims in Ottery St. Catchpole were killed in the same manner," Padma said. Emma cleared her throat.

"Bludgeoning and stabbing?" She asked. Everyone looked at her in surprise. She shrugged and spoke again, "It was reported as a terrorist attack in the muggle world

"That's how they died. At the orphanage there were fifty-seven children killed and ten adults. One of the adults was hurt worse than any of the others. She was killed magically with small cutting curses. She bled to death before her body was beaten," Padma said in a small voice.

"It's an odd target," Diggle commented.

"That occurred to me too. After looking over the reports that Director Thomas sent me I am positive it was an attack by the Inferi. There are just too many similarities to the victims of Ottery St. Catchpole," Padma concluded.

"Riddle grew up in an orphanage. Maybe it was that one?" Luna asked.

"I suppose it is possible but is it important?" Molly asked.

"Every little bit helps," Sprout told her.

"How can an attack on a town the size of Ottery St. Catchpole have no witnesses?" Hermione asked. She had been to the town once and it wasn't that small.

"Ministry cover up," Molly told her. Now everyone turned to her. She gave them a weak smile, "They obliterated everyone who was in the town. Well, everyone they knew about. My brothers were there but got out when the fighting started."

“Gideon and Fabian left in the middle of a fight?” Arabella asked in disbelief. She had known the Prewett brothers very well. They had been absolute Gryffindors.

“They had four of my boys with them. By the time they got back to town, it was almost over. They saw fifteen of them,” Molly told them.

“Any idea how the Inferi fought?” Hermione asked. Molly shook her head.

“From the wounds on the victims I would say that they have crude weapons. Clubs and swords maybe,” Padma informed them.

“That would make sense. Even if they were magical when alive, they would have lost that when they died,” Flitwick said. His usual chipperness was gone.

“I found some information in the library at... at...” Emma frowned as she tried to speak.

“The Fidelius Charm,” Hermione reminded her gently. Emma smiled at her daughter.

“I found some information in the library at the place I am living.”

“Information on Inferi?” Flitwick asked. He continued, “Just where are you living?” he asked. Since transferring the charm to Harry, he had forgotten that the house existed. Hermione smiled at the small man and motioned for her mum to continue.

Emma slid her notebook across the table to her daughter.

“Inferi can be created by recently deceased bodies or prepared bodies. There were many examples of people in the past that killed their enemies and then made their bodies into Inferi. It allowed them to control their enemies for a short time. No one who knew the dead person would be fooled for long. It was an easy way to get through wards, many of which allow people not on the wards to be accompanied by those that are.”

She took a deep breath and continued, "There are legends of several armies that were cursed to become Inferi. No one has ever found them though. It takes a thirty six hour ritual required to awaken them."

"That much magic would have been noticed by the Ministry," Tom said. Everyone in the room seemed to agree except for Flitwick and Emma.

"In truth, it's not a lot of magic. It's more of a long stretch of magic," Flitwick said. Emma nodded and then he continued, "I found the Ritual of Awakening in Albus' library. I don't think that the ministry would notice it."

"So what exactly is an Inferi?" Luna asked.

"It's just a body. No free will, easy to control under the Imperius curse. If that is even needed. There is a theory that the person who animates them can command them. They feel no pain; any would continue to fight until they had no limbs left," Flitwick told her.

How do you kill them if they're already dead?

The body needs to be destroyed, said Emma. There was an example referenced from 1387 where..." It was obvious where Hermione got her research skills from. The truth was, they had very few hard facts to work from, and the eyewitness accounts weren't specific.

"Harry said that they didn't seem to like light or fire," Hermione told them.

"Fire is easy," Molly said holding up her wand. Emma flinched, thinking of her home that had been torched.

"Sure it is, but do you want to be that close to one?" Arabella asked. Molly agreed.

"We need a way to create an intensely burning fire from a distance," Padma mused.

“What about an accelerant?” Hermione asked. She received a table of blank looks.

“Muggles don’t have ever-burning candles and can not sustain a fire without fuel. Diesel fuel or kerosene should do it. How much would it take to protect the castle? How big is the castle?” Hermione muttered.

“We can’t set the castle on fire!” Molly objected, not understanding.

“No, but we could create a ring of fire around the castle. If it were far enough away from the castle the Inferi would burn up before they reached the doors,” Arabella said.

“How?” Poppy asked thinking of all of the burns she had seen from potions class.

“If we saturate the ground in a circle around the castle say... a ten feet wide, the Inferi would have to cross through it to get to us,” Hermione said.

“Yes but how would you light it. Anyone close to it would be killed by the heat wave,” Emma pointed out.

“I’ll ask Fred and George to work on it. If all else fails we could throw a Molotov cocktail at it,” Hermione said making a note.

“A what?” Tom asked thinking of his bar.

As Emma explained the muggle reference Hermione was flipping through her mother’s notebook and came across a note on about werewolves. She asked about it.

“It was mentioned at the last meeting that they are a potential threat. I have been looking into what would stop a werewolf attack,” Emma told them.

“That’s not a bad idea. I have a list of things that are potentially harmful because of Bill,” Molly told them.

“Why don’t you two work on that together? Molly do you know where Mum is living?” Hermione asked. Molly nodded. Harry had invited her and Arthur to Hermione’s birthday party. They had not been able to make it.

The meeting broke up but Emma and Hermione didn’t move. Emma would need to head back to number twelve by portkey. Molly agreed to accompany her but she knew that Emma wanted some time with Hermione. Molly would give almost anything for the opportunity to talk to her daughter one more time.

Emma and Hermione invited Molly back to Hermione’s room. She was about to beg off when she changed her mind. She would love to visit with Hermione and Harry.

She told them an amusing story about when she was in school. Both of the Granger women laughed at Arthur’s attempt to woo her. Emma told them that she and Dan had been friends for years before they dated. He had actually dated her best friend first.

“Dad and Aunt Diane?” Hermione asked in amusement as she unlocked the door to the suite.

“Yes. They dated for almost a year before Diane decided she needed someone more serious,” Emma said with a smile. Her husband’s sense of humor was one of the things she loved most about him.

“Well, Uncle Jack is a bit of a stick in the mud,” Hermione commented. Emma laughed at the understatement.

Harry was not in their suite. Molly noted that the room was not to the standard of Hogwarts spotless. Hermione revealed that she wouldn’t let any of the Hogwarts elves clean up after them. Dobby and Winky were busy taking care of number twelve and she didn’t want to tax them either.

The room wasn’t a mess, it just looked lived in. Both desks were covered in parchment and muggle notebooks. Hermione added her mother’s notebook to the messier of the two desks.

Their visit was short but nice. Harry was happy to see each of them when he returned from his rounds about the castle.

"You're patrolling by yourself?" Molly asked, frowning.

"No. I got a turn with Turpin tonight," Harry said.

"Oh fun," Hermione said sarcastically. The detention she had served with McGonagall had been worth the duel.

"She's... better? I don't know. I think she finally realized that there is more to life than being head girl. You wouldn't have acted like that if Lisa was head girl," Harry commented. Hermione bit her lower lip and he felt warmth stirring. He wanted to be the one biting her lip. He pushed the thought out of his mind with the reminder that her mother was sitting next to him.

"I would have been upset but I wouldn't have called her nasty names or tried to undermine her authority," Hermione finally answered.

"Upset? Yeah, I can see that. I was really jealous when Ron was named prefect and I wasn't. But I only held it against him for a few minutes," Harry told them. Molly laughed.

"You were jealous? I was shocked. Bill, Charlie and Percy I could understand, but the youngest four? Not a chance," Molly said with a chuckle. She was still smiling when she said, "They just weren't prefect material. Especially the twins. Ron never applied himself. I know it irritated you as much as it did me," she said to Hermione who smiled.

She continued, "And Ginny was just as mischievous as they were. I swear half the stuff they got blamed for she actually did."

"That worked both ways. Remember the Valentine you got second year?" Hermione asked Harry.

"Remember? Even pulling a Lockheart wouldn't remove that memory," Harry said. He explained to Emma who looked puzzled.

“George actually sent that to you to embarrass Ginny,” Hermione said with a laugh.

The older women left soon after that.

Hermione almost forgot to tell Harry about Slughorn. They agreed that it was probably nothing. They knew the man should have told someone about Riddle asking about Horcruxes. They knew that he would make an effort to become close to anyone who seemed to have a bright future. Neither of them liked that he had followed Hermione.

“I don’t want to scratch his back and he ain’t getting near yours,” Harry told her. She smiled and gave him a deep kiss as they snuggled into bed. All thoughts of the potions professor left her mind as she and Harry held onto each other.

... --- ...

Professor McGonagall stood up and said, “There is an old muggle saying, ‘The brain can not absorb that which the bottom cannot withstand.’ Old Crow has gone on for 23 pages so far and appears to be no more than halfway through the chapter. If you haven’t done so already, you should revise your chapter notes for the chapter review that will be due before you leave. Six inches should be sufficient. Please return as soon as you can if you need to use the washroom.”

A few minutes later the stern professor looked up from her reading. Seeing that everyone was back in their seats she said, “Let us continue with the story.”

... --- ...

Saturday morning found Hermione getting out of bed a lot earlier than she wanted. She snuggled against Harry for warmth one last time before making the effort to get out of bed. Before she could get far, Harry grabbed her and pulled her back next to him.

After a couple of good morning kisses that left them both a little flustered they managed to get up. She noticed that Harry had a slight

problem down below. He could join the club as far as she was concerned. Sleeping next to him and not doing much more than snog was driving her mad in a slow, sweet way.

She showered fairly quickly knowing that she barely had time for breakfast. As she left the bathroom she passed Harry in the doorway and her robe fell open. She went to grab it but Harry stopped her. She couldn't identify what it was in his eyes as he pushed her robe open and examined her body. She liked it though.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered as he leaned down to kiss her again. His hands roamed for a few seconds and then he pulled back.

"We shouldn't..." she said, dejection thick in her voice.

"I know. I can't help myself sometimes though. But since we are leaving for a while this morning..." he said with a wicked grin.

"We are?" She asked, pulling away slightly. She didn't trust herself.

"Yeah. Dan mentioned needing a computer. I thought we would go out this morning and then have lunch with your parents," he told her, disappointed when she tied the belt to her robe.

"But I can't. I have a potions tutoring session this morning."

"So reschedule it," he said easily.

"I can't. This morning was the only time we were all free," she told him. She didn't like the way he just assumed that she could rearrange her tight schedule.

"Oh come on. Its just potions. They'll understand," he told her. Didn't she want to go with him?

"No, Harry, they won't. I can't just cancel at the last minute. Allie has an exam on Monday and she needs the help. How about this afternoon?" She asked, thinking maybe they could get away for the night.

"I have training with Moody and Alyx," he said frowning. She should have known that.

"I'm sorry, Harry. If you had said something earlier I may have been able to find another time for them," Hermione said. She wondered if moving his schedule around had occurred to him and it showed in her voice.

"I didn't know I needed an appointment to have a date with my girlfriend," he snapped not liking her tone.

"What?"

"If you don't want to go, just say so," he told her.

"I told you I already have plans, Harry. I can't just abandon them. That doesn't mean I don't want to go," she answered hotly.

"You could cancel if you really wanted to. I guess they are more important," he said angrily.

She scowled at him. How could he think that?

Then he continued, "Ginny wouldn't have ditched me to tutor someone."

She flinched, unbelievably hurt. Then she just got mad.

"Well, I'm not Ginny. I never will be, Harry. If you want someone who will drop everything for you any time you decide that you have time for them, then go find her. You have plenty of fan club members to pick from."

Hermione stormed away from him disgusted with him and with herself. She wondered how she could have deluded herself so thoroughly. Of course he would compare her to Ginny.

Harry slammed the door to the bathroom that they shared. He couldn't believe her. Why in the world would she want to tutor a bunch of snot nose younger year students instead of being with him?

He wondered why she didn't want to go. They never spent any time together and what was that rubbish about him wanting someone else?

Hermione was gone when he finished his shower. He put on muggle clothes and decided to get breakfast before leaving.

The Head Girl stood up and left the table as he sat down. She didn't say a word and he could see the anger in her eyes. He scowled into his scrambled eggs and snatched a piece of toast. A couple of their classmates raised an eyebrow but wisely refrained from commenting.

"I can't, Jacob. Hermione went to a lot of trouble to fit me in her schedule. You know how bad I am at potions," a girl three seats down was saying. Harry glanced down the table at her. Allie Greystone was finishing her breakfast quickly.

"Yeah, she's almost as bad as I was," Neville said with a smirk. Jacob Wellington laughed. Neville's abysmal potion making skills were well known in the tower.

"All right. I guess tomorrow will be okay. After herbology?" The fifth year boy asked his girlfriend. She smiled brilliantly at him and Harry turned away.

Harry left the table still scowling. He decided that his heart wasn't into computer shopping. Besides, he had no idea what to buy. He made his way to the third floor corridor to get some practice in before Moody arrived. He was surprised to find Alyx and Moody shooting spells at each other.

He fired at Moody, joining the fray without a second thought.

"Potter! You weren't supposed to be here until this afternoon," Moody growled, as Alyx handed him his eye back. Harry repaired the older man's leg quickly.

"I thought I would practice for a bit," Harry told him. He stretched a little, letting his back and leg muscles warm up.

They worked on firing while evading. It would be a useful skill to have. Harry and Alyx were both pretty decent at it. The practice dummies started to predict their moves after a while. They adjusted well and tried to be unpredictable. Moody was impressed enough to stop after two hours and give them half a seal of approval. They waited for him to leave before they both collapsed to the floor in exhaustion.

“So what’s going on?” Alyx asked as she attempted to stretch her legs. She was bruised all over from jumping and falling for two hours.

“Huh?” Harry asked and she smiled at him.

“You seem distracted and angry. You okay?” She asked. She liked the younger man. He was a decent bloke.

“Yeah. Hermione and I...” he trailed off not really knowing what to say.

“Ah, lovers quarrel. Got it,” she answered him.

“We’re not lovers,” he said frowning.

“Right.”

“We’re not. We’ve never made love,” he told her not sure why he was having the discussion with her.

“Well you certainly act like you are. Anyone looking at you can see that you love her and that she loves you,” Alyx told him. He frowned.

“Yeah, she loves me so much she would rather spend her free time with a bunch of girls teaching them potions,” he said angrily.

“Really?”

“I told her this morning that we were going shopping for a computer for her Dad and she completely blew me off,” he said indignantly.

“You told her or you asked if she wanted to go?” Alyx inquired. He scowled.

"What does it matter? She didn't want to go," he snapped.

"It matters a lot, Harry. Tell me what happened," she said. So he did. He didn't leave anything out except for the bathrobe being open and Hermione being naked.

"Wow. You're lucky Harry. I would have hexed you," Alyx told him when he finished.

"What?" he demanded.

"Look at it from her point of view. You expected her to just drop everything for you."

"I thought she would like to spend some time with me," he said icily.

"I'm sure she would. Or would have until you started treating her like an underling and compared her to Ginny," Alyx said just as coldly. Harry, I like you, respect you and owe you a half dozen life debts, but sometimes you unknowingly act like an ass."

"I didn't...I'm not."

"Yes, you did," she interrupted. "You told her that you were going. You got mad when she wouldn't drop everything for you and then you shoved it in her face that the girl you loved, who is dead, would have done it."

"We never spend any time together. I just wanted to be able to be with her for a while," he said miserably.

"And that's all her fault, is it?"

"She wouldn't change the tutoring time," he said scowling.

"And you wouldn't change your practice time," Alyx countered. Harry didn't like the way this argument was going but didn't reply, just sitting there continuing to scowl. Alyx considered him for a moment, then she realized something.

"You have no idea, do you?" Alyx asked in amazement.

"Huh?" he answered. She rolled her eyes.

"Hermione gets a lot of pleasure out of teaching, Harry. It makes her feel better about herself and she needs that sometimes. You do know how insecure she is, right?" Alyx saw the look on his face and knew that he had no clue. She sighed, "Imagine her childhood and you can see why. Yeah, she had her parents telling her that she was loved and perfect but look at the way her peers treated her. You know what it's like to be muggleborn.

Harry frowned as he thought. He had always figured that he would have had a somewhat normal childhood if not for the Dursley's. He knew that Hermione had not had an easy time in primary school. He vaguely recalled Colin saying something about being picked on a lot.

"Kids can sense when another kid is different. No one wants to be different. Every muggleborn I know has stories about primary school that would make you want to cry. Even I had trouble, Harry." She smiled at his surprise and then continued, "Oh yes. Even if I didn't look different from my whole family everyone knew I was."

"I'm not saying it's all your fault either. She should talk to you and explain what she's feeling. You two need to talk to each other and you need to forget that you are the leader of the Order when you do it. I would dump any bloke who thought he could demand what I do with my time," she told him.

She left him sitting there thinking about it. He knew she was right but he still couldn't understand why Hermione wouldn't change her schedule for him.

He wandered down to the potions dungeons with a disillusionment charm covering him. He crept into the classroom to watch Hermione for a few moments. He needed to know why.

Hermione was watching as Katlyn Greystone slowly stirred her potion. She didn't stand over her in an intimidating manner the way Snape

had. Instead Hermione was gently guiding her through the process of making the burn healing salve.

Then she moved on to where Allie Greystone and Erin Erickson were reading their texts. She answered a couple of questions, explaining in detail what they wanted to know. A light seemed to come on for Erin and Hermione was almost as excited as the younger girl.

Wendy Williams was reading a muggle notebook that Harry recognized. It was Hermione's potions notebook. She had offered to let Ron and Harry both use it in the past. They had both declined, not wanting to read anymore than required. He moved so that he could watch over Katlyn's shoulder.

"Harry, if you startle Katlyn into ruining that you'll have bogie bats beating you for a month," Hermione threatened. Harry moved away from the cauldron, sighed and canceled the charm. Wendy jumped as he appeared near her.

"Sorry. I didn't want to disturb you," he said picking a seat close to Wendy but not right next to her.

Hermione continued to teach for a few minutes. Allie and Wendy decided that they had enough and left shortly after Harry arrived. Katlyn and Erin both continued to work. Hermione sat down next to Harry and watched Katlyn continue to chop, slice and mince her potions ingredients.

"How'd you know I was there?" He asked.

"Ward on the door."

They were silent for a few minutes and then they both spoke at the same time.

"Harry, I..."

"Hermione, I..."

They both stopped and then she hesitantly spoke.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped at you this morning," she said sincerely. To her surprise he choked back a laugh.

"No, Hermione. I'm sorry. I should act like your boyfriend, not your boss," he said. He was still smiling. She cocked her head and looked at him inquiringly.

"Alyx. She said I was lucky you didn't hex me," he told her. She slowly smiled.

"I didn't think of it," she admitted. He moved closer and took her hand.

"When you finish here will you come back to our rooms? I would like to talk with you," he said. She nodded and watched him leave.

Katlyn finished her potion a few minutes later. It was perfect. Hermione gave her an O for her efforts and Erin gave her a high five. The younger girls shooed Hermione away, both of them smirking.

Hermione found Harry in the shower. She was tempted to join him. After a few naughty thoughts she decided that decorum was the better course. It took her a while to reach the decision.

They left the castle just before lunch. Once again, as a courtesy, they let McGonagall know where they were going.

Hermione bought lunch at a fast food restaurant and they marveled at the greasy food. True, the elves at Hogwarts were not exactly health conscious, but a double whopper with cheese and king sized fries was pushing it.

Harry made a joke about having an advantage of being starved as a kid. Hermione didn't think it was that funny but she gave him a weak smile.

It didn't take them long to make their computer purchase and have it shipped to the mail drop. They decided to stay in London for the afternoon and then stop by number twelve for dinner.

They walked around for a while side by side. Harry didn't know what to say. He knew that he'd hurt her feelings and that apologizing was probably not enough. Hermione couldn't find the words either. The silence was a little uncomfortable.

After a while she took his hand.

Hermione bit her lower lip while she thought about what she wanted to say. She had been thinking about it all morning.

"Harry, I'm sorry I walked away from you this morning. I shouldn't have left before we could talk either."

Harry stopped and turned to face her. "Hermione, I'm an idiot. I wasn't thinking of your feelings at all... And I should never have brought up Ginny... It wasn't ..."

"Don't, Harry," Hermione interrupted, looking down, unable to meet his eyes. "I know I'll never be able to replace Ginny in your ..."

"Hermione, no!" Harry grabbed her shoulders and forced her to look at him. "Don't ever say that. You're much more important to me than Ginny ever was."

Hermione's eyes glistened. "How can you say that, Harry? She was prettier than me, more fun than me. Everybody liked her. Nobody ever liked me that way."

"Ginny was my girlfriend for a few weeks. It hurt like Hell when she died, but Hermione, for years you've been the most important person in my life. I was just too blind to see it. Well, I'm not blind now. You're beautiful, you're the smartest person I know, you're the most thoughtful person I know and you care about me more anyone else. But the most important thing is that I love you. You and no one else."

She buried her head in his chest, her tears turning to tears of joy, her heart pounding as she heard those words she had so longed to hear as he wrapped her in his arms.

After a while she said softly, "Oh Harry, I don't ever want to fight like that again. I felt so awful all morning."

Their lips found each other and they forgot about everything for a while. Then they pulled back again, smiled, and took each other's hand and continued their walk. They wandered around the theater district for a while. Hermione pointed out a marquee for Shakespeare's Winter Tale.

"Mum's favorite play," she said rolling her eyes. He smiled knowing that her name was from the story but never having read it for himself.

"Think she and your Dad would like to see it? We can get tickets," he said. She smiled, knowing her parents were going crazy locked in number twelve. Harry purchased tickets for the following week.

They walked a bit more and then Hermione stopped to tie one of her trainers. She removed her wand and set up the same ward she had used when she caught Slughorn following her.

It wasn't long before the ward was tripped. She stopped walking and grabbed Harry and snogged him so hard he thought that he would have to find his socks. She continued the kiss and slid her hand along his wrist holder, tapped it, then she pulled him into a tight hug.

"You're gonna need that. We are being followed," she whispered. It took barely a second for him to switch modes. They walked slowly keeping an eye out for anyone. Harry led her into a small park and she sat down on a bench.

To anyone out for a stroll they looked like a young married couple canoodling. In reality they were plotting. Hermione set a couple more wards around the park while snogging Harry. She was careful to keep her wand out of sight even though there was no one in sight.

Then they sat facing each other talking in low tones. Hermione watched over Harry's shoulder as she felt the ward being tripped. There was no one there. She frowned.

"What?" He asked, his eyes narrowing.

"I must have set the wards wrong. The one leading left by the swing set just went off but no one..." She carefully used her wand to create a wind.

"There is a wizard under an invisibility cloak by the swing set," she said softly reaching for his hand. It was beginning to get dark out and Harry considered apparition, but he didn't want to run. He wanted to know who was following them. He leaned closer.

"Just one?" he asked. He kissed her and she nodded. He kissed her again and then said, "Summon the cloak, I'll stun them."

Focusing not on the kiss, Hermione silently summoned the invisibility cloak. To her surprise two of them flew at her. Harry was faced left so she shot a stunner at the figure on the right. Both of them hit their mark.

They summoned both of the stunned figures and tossed the cloaks back over them without taking a good look at them. Hermione quickly canceled the tracking charms that she found on them. Then, as planned, they each grabbed an invisible person and apparated to the front door of number twelve.

... --- ...

Dan, Emma and Diane were playing cards in the living room when they entered the room moving quickly. Hermione looked strange pointing her wand at thin air. The three adults were shocked when a loud thump accompanied her withdrawal of her wand.

Harry held up his hand to silence them when the questions started. He nodded at Hermione who summoned the cloaks again.

Auror Cadet Chambers and Auror Bob Sunset were unconscious on the floor. Harry scowled at them. Hermione searched them carefully for weapons and portkeys. Each had two wands, a portkey and an emergency pack. As she took all of their equipment into the bathroom Harry checked both of them for the Dark Mark. They were clean.

Harry pointed his wand and they were quickly bound in tight coils of steel wires. He woke Chambers first. He groaned but his eyes flew open when Harry placed his dragon hide boot in the middle of his chest. Hermione stood off to the side with her wand at the ready.

Dan, Emma and Diane watched, not sure what was happening but afraid.

"You have five seconds to start explaining just what in the Hell you two were doing," he said pointing his wand between the man's eyes. Richard gasped.

"It's a stealth training mission. Apparently I failed," he said his eyes wide.

"Bullocks! No one knew where we were, Richard. Tell me the truth," he growled.

"That's what I was told! I swear!" he said still gasping. Hermione pulled Harry away from him.

"He can't answer if he can't breathe," Hermione said.

"Wake him up. He assigned me to this mission. I swear. We were supposed to keep an eye on you two," Chambers told them. Hermione considered it then stunned him again. She woke up Sunset.

"Oh shit," the Auror groaned. Harry made the same demands of the Auror that he had of the Cadet.

"Moody. He thought that he would test your vigilance and Chambers' stealth skills at the same time," Sunset explained.

"Who told Moody where we were?" Hermione demanded.

"McGonagall. You two are high priority targets," he explained squirming and the coils tightened.

Harry stood there for a few seconds attempting to get his temper to cool off. Several things in the room shattered. He realized after a few seconds that he was not the one doing it. Hermione was furious.

"How long have you been following us?" she demanded. Sunset shook his head trying to clear it.

"We picked you up at the store. McGonagall knew where you were going," he explained.

Hermione shook with rage. How dare they, she thought. She pointed her wand at Sunset. His eyes widened at the look on her face.

"Make sure you tell Moody that you're the one we spotted. Stupefy," she snarled. Harry wrapped his arms around her tightly. He was just as upset as she was.

"Do we believe them?" Harry asked finally.

"No way to tell until we talk to Moody or McGonagall," Hermione answered as she moved towards their captives.

"What's going on?" Dan asked looking at the men on the floor. His daughter was running her wand over Chambers looking concerned. She also worked Sunset over but she kicked him in the ass when she stood up.

"Dobby!" Hermione called looking at her father.

"Miss Hermione! Yous is home. I gets..."

But Hermione interrupted him. "Dobby, please go to Hogwarts. We need Madame Pomfrey to come and make sure Richard is okay. Tell her he was stunned twice within five minutes and his heart rate is very slow. Oh, and find Alastor Moody for me. I want to talk to him," Hermione told the elf. Dobby's huge eyes got even bigger. He squeaked and popped away.

Harry explained what had happened as Hermione attempted to get her anger under control. She felt sick. She was almost in control when Moody showed up and her composure was lost.

"Did you tell them to follow us?" Harry demanded. Moody nodded, looking pleased.

"So you spotted them. I told Sunset that Chambers was lacking in the stealth department. I was right," Moody said smugly.

"You bloody idiot," Hermione roared. Moody stepped back from the young woman. He kept his hand on his wand, not sure what she was going to do.

"Why?" she snarled. Harry looked over at her thinking that maybe he should stop her, but he didn't. He wanted answers too.

"Why? Because he needed the training and you two needed a reminder that this is war, not play time," Moody snapped at her.

"What the Hell are you going on about?" Hermione demanded loudly as Poppy showed up. She immediately went to work on Chambers.

"You two... Trips to London to shop? A night out whenever you feel like it? You needed to be reminded that there is a war happening, and like it or not you are part of it. You are targets. You're both leaders. You can't just take off when ever you want," Moody told her.

"A reminder? You think I need to be reminded what's at stake?" Harry asked in shock.

"Of course you do. You're losing your focus. You think I didn't notice how off you were this morning? I heard your little talk with Alyx. Disgusting. Letting yourself be distracted by a little action in the sack and your sad childhood. As for you Granger, he has the right to order you anywhere he wants to. He says shit and you should be asking what color, not picking a fight because he didn't ask you first," Moody told them.

“You listened...” Harry’s mouth dropped open. He was too stunned to move, but Hermione wasn’t.

“I don’t need a reminder that the two men that I love most in this world are at the top of that wanker’s list of people to kill. I think about it all the damn time! I’m reminded every time I walk into Gryffindor tower and automatically look to see if Ron and Harry are playing chess, every time I walk into the hospital wing for my medi-lessons, every meal when I think of checking the salt shaker for a Weeze, and when I look at the pictures Colin took and think of all of them that he will never take. I am reminded every time I need a girl to talk to and I remember that my best friend is dead. I am reminded every damn time I see Dean and Seamus, and at least one of them is in every last one of my classes.”

If we want to have dinner away from school so that we can forget that everyone we know is either dead or in mortal peril, it’s only to keep our sanity. Our personal life is none of your business. If we want to make love on the head table during the Halloween feast it is not your place to question our decision. Harry didn’t talk to you about our argument and you shouldn’t have listened to him talk to Alyx. You have no right to send people to follow us. Do you have any idea what almost happened? Do you?” Hermione shouted at the old Auror.

Emma put her hands on Hermione’s shoulders and tried to get her to calm down. Harry thought that it was brave of Emma to get close to hurricane Hermione. She shook her mum’s hands off and took a couple steps towards Moody.

“Chambers almost died because of your idiocy,” Hermione snapped.

“Your elf told Poppy that he was stunned,” Moody said looking at the master mediwitch at work.

“I almost used the Reducto on him. I was five feet from him. He would have been dead before he hit the ground. I almost killed him,” Hermione bellowed as she started to shake physically.

“Well at least you learned something from Weasley’s mistake,” Moody mused. Hermione and Harry both drew on him before thinking about it.

“You won’t be happy until Harry is as paranoid as you are will you?” Hermione demanded.

“Get out of here before I lose my temper,” Harry told him in a voice made of ice.

“Being paranoid has saved me more than once. It’s nice to see Potter being vigilant,” Moody answered as he backed his way out of the room.

Poppy took Chambers and Sunset back to Hogwarts hospital wing for observation. They both would be okay. Before she left she told Harry that they would not be expected back tonight. She nodded at Hermione and said softly, “Take care of her.”

Hermione was standing at the fireplace with her hands on the mantel. Even the muggles could feel the rage pouring off the girl. As Harry was arranging to have Dobby help with transport Diane approached Hermione slowly. She was shocked to see the edge of the fireplace crumbling as Hermione’s magic got more and more out of control.

Convinced Hermione was about to have a complete mental breakdown she spoke softly, “It’s all right Hermione. He’s gone. You didn’t kill anyone. It’s OK.”

She watched her Goddaughter carefully. She saw the tension in Hermione’s back change slightly and she wrapped her arms around the girl. Hermione began to sob loudly. Emma joined her holding Hermione. They heard Harry releasing his tension by throwing up in the bathroom that was close by. Dan went to him.

It took a while before all five of them were gathered in the living room again. Harry sat on floor next to the love seat where Emma was holding a silently crying Hermione. Dan took a seat next to Diane on the sofa.

After a long moment Hermione sat up. She had a horrible case of the hiccups from crying so hard. Harry looked at her concerned. She reached down and ran her hand through the back of his hair. He took her hand and gave her a weak smile.

"Today sucked," he commented. Hermione hiccupped again and gave a short bitter laugh.

"Yeah. But no one died. I guess it only kinda sucked," she answered.

Dan cleared his throat and started to speak but then stopped.

"What is it Dan?" Harry asked as Hermione rolled off the love seat next to him. She leaned against his shoulder and he slipped an arm around her.

"I was going to make a joke. I think I'll pass," the older man answered.

"Oh, go on. If it's bad at least we can make fun of you," Diane told him. Emma smiled a little at Hermione and moved to sit next to her husband.

"Make love on the head table during the Halloween feast? I hope you're planning on using the invisibility cloak," Dan said after a little more hesitation. Hermione hiccupped again and buried her face in the side of Harry's arm. Harry turned bright red and looked at the man's only daughter.

"Well, I guess that's one way to avoid our usual luck on Halloween," Harry said.

"No (hic) trolls this year, Harry?"

"Yes, my love. No trolls. No petrified cats. No mass murderers. No death day parties. No flaming goblets. I think we should just stay in our rooms and read," Harry told her.

"If we did it on the head table on Halloween we would probably end up with triplets. No reading either, our books would probably attack us," Hermione said between hiccups her face still buried in his arm.

Harry looked at her for a brief moment and then threw his head back and laughed loudly. She joined him after a moment. Diane watched them slip in to hysterics knowing that it was more stress relief. It took them a while before they stopped.

“Are you two...” Dan’s question was muffled by his wife’s hand. He shot her a look questioning.

“Don’t ask a question you don’t want an answer to,” she whispered. He frowned and looked at the teens. Harry was already red faced from laughing so hard. He gently wiped Hermione’s tears away.

“Daddy, you have nothing to worry about. Harry is a complete and total gentleman,” Hermione told him as she took Harry’s hand. She looked at her father and said, “He would never do anything I didn’t want him to.”

Dan nodded and then frowned. Why didn’t that make him feel any better?

Hermione sunk into Harry’s arms listening to him speak to her parents. The bout of crying had left her completely raw emotionally. She couldn’t believe how close she had come to killing Chambers. She noticed that Diane was watching her and she forced a small smile.

Diane left her seat and came over to sit next to Hermione on the floor. She didn’t say anything at first, instead taking the time for Hermione to get comfortable.

“Hey kiddo, you know I’ve got two ears, right?” Diane finally asked. Hermione stared at her for a few moments then smiled weakly.

“Yeah, I know you can listen.”

“Well don’t forget it. That goes for you too Harry. Any time you need to talk, just ring me.”

Diane saw Harry frown and hurried to explain, "I can't be your therapist. I'm way to close to the Grangers. But I can explain what you are feeling. Or just listen. Sometimes you need an outside perspective of what is happening."

Dan and Emma watched as Diane expertly defused the teen's angst at the thought of needing a therapist. Talking to someone didn't mean you were mad. It meant that you knew you needed help. Diane explained a little about emotions and what happens when you ignore them. She pointed out to them that the enormous stress that they were under could kill them just as Voldemort could.

The five of them went to bed that night exhausted.

Dan and Emma went to sleep thinking that they should be doing more but knowing they couldn't. They were both worried about the teens. Neither considered the stress that they themselves were under.

Hermione thought about her Godmother, knowing what Diane said was true. She didn't want to admit it but a few sessions probably wouldn't hurt. Hermione had never told anyone but she had taken a few sessions with a school counselor while in primary school. She had stopped after another kid found out and started making fun of her. Making more fun of her.

Harry was afraid of what the wizarding public would think. He had been called crazy so often that he didn't want to give them more ammunition. He wished he had met Diane after the Tri-wizarding tournament or even after Sirius had been murdered. He thought of Hermione and how she had helped him through the rough spots. He pulled her closer and kissed her temple as she slept not knowing what he would do without her.

Diane fell asleep in the strange room in a strange house thinking about how she could help the other four.

... --- ...

Dan was up early waiting for Harry to wake up. If it were confession time, he might as well get it over with. As it turned out, Hermione

woke up first. He could tell that his daughter was suffering from an emotional hangover. Her eyes were swollen and she was moving slower than normal. Dan knew that she would be better eventually but it broke his heart seeing her like this.

After taking the cup that he handed her, he began, "Your friend Moody..."

"He's not my friend, Dad. He's Harry's assassination instructor."

Dan took a breath before continuing. He didn't want to get bogged down over an irrelevant detail with an angry teenager. He replied, "I'm certain that he would use a different choice of words, but I need to show you something. He handed her the London Times from a few days ago. It had a photo of several bodies lined up in a row outside a medical building. Hermione recognized the building. "I was caught sneaking out of the house that same day by two Aurors who reminded me that if they could find me, those lunatics could too. There are people who are trying pretty hard to keep us all alive. I just needed a reminder. Maybe that's what that Harry's mentor Moody was trying to point out. You're a smart young woman Hermione. I'm not trying to tell you what to do, just give you a different point of view."

Suddenly Hermione envied Harry for all of the time that her dad had been spending with Harry. Envied wasn't the right word, she was grateful. She hugged him and said, "Thanks Daddy. You're the best."

... --- ...

Riddle blew down the front door of the Burrow. Molly and Arthur didn't look to see who had come to murder them. They took the emergency portkey that Abraxan had issued to all of the ministry managers. Seconds later, they found themselves in the Ministry MLE holding room.

"What happened?" asked the attendant.

"Someone blew up our front door. We didn't wait to find out what they wanted."

“I’ll dispatch a team of hit wizards, Mr. Weasley.”

“No Jeffrey. Give them a few minutes. There’s nothing in there worth having any of the Ministry wizards die over.”

Moments later John Thomas came over. “What happened Arthur?”

“The Burrow was attacked. We left immediately.”

... --- ...

Perhaps it was no surprise that Voldemort spent twenty minutes at the house searching for and attempting to summon his old diary. When he was satisfied that it wasn’t there, he torched the old house.

He returned to Dolohov’s cottage and found Lucius. Using Legillimancy he saw the image from June of 93 showing an angry Lucius Malfoy with the diary, his diary that contained half of his essence. A moment later he saw the image that Malfoy would have never volunteered to tell – An angry Lucius throwing the diary into the burning fireplace.

In the coldest voice that Lucius ever remembered hearing, the man who had once been Tom Riddle asked, “Did I not tell you to keep the diary safe no matter what happened?”

Lucius truly believed at that moment that he’d seen his last sunrise. He simply replied, “Yes Master.”

“Crucio.” Riddle put everything that he had into the curse, but let up after five seconds. Malfoy didn’t bother to get up. He was waiting for the end that he knew was near. Riddle would have liked to torture Malfoy until the stars came out, but he possessed neither the stamina nor had reason to believe that doing so would help him. Instead he said, “Get up. You need to find the gold cup that I left you.”

Malfoy left the room, amazed by his own luck. Based on his knowledge of Ministry workings, he knew that all of the items that had survived the fire would have been impounded and placed into storage.

He would need some inside help to get the cup that could help to keep him alive.

Riddle sensed the change in the spell that he had cast and immediately departed.

... --- ...

The division commander opened his eyes for the first time in 2100 years. Commander Tutui had been trained by the Roman military genius Marius himself. The division that he had commanded had won every battle that it had fought. The soldiers were wealthy by the standards of the day and all had owned their own armor made either of small rings or strips of brass.

They were the Triarii division, the division of veterans. Tutui had commanded almost 1200 men. They had been placed in reserve at the battle of Chutney in what would become northeastern Scotland. Tutui's commander had sent a squad of runners to call the reserve division out of its holding position and flank the enemy. However the squad of runners had been ambushed on the way and Tutui had never received the word.

The Legion Commander was outraged that his main force had suffered a major defeat and had called on the great wizard of the day, an ancestor of Slytherin, to curse Commander Tutui and the Triarii division in eternity until they were called upon and fulfilled their debt.

Within hours of each other the Centurions, archers, engineers and foot soldiers had awoken. The foot soldiers wore armor of metal strips sewn onto a leather jerkin. They carried short swords known as a gladius, wore bronze helmets and carried painted rectangular shields made of laminated birch that were approximately two feet wide and four feet in height.

Tutui watched him come closer and knew that the man with the strange eyes was the one who had called them out of their long slumber. Despite the differences of time and origin, the two men found that they could communicate with each other. The castle to be taken was 120 miles to the west and about 20 miles south through

hilly terrain that could only be traveled at night due to the Inferi's need to remain hidden. They did not want to be subjected to long exposure to the hot sun and would find a place to camp each morning at sunrise. Riddle planned to attack the castle at sundown on October 31st.

... --- ...

McGonagall stood up and said, "Pass in your reviews now." She looked at them for a moment and said, "Mr. Crow, your last chapter was long, even by Miss Granger's standards. She looked carefully and said, "Forty feet of parchment. Very impressive."

The Old Crow replied, "It may have been long Professor, but I kept the death and mayhem to a minimum. I did my research."

McGonagall smiled and replied, "Five points, Mr. Crow."

Chapter 21

... --- ...

When Hermione had finished hugging her dad, Harry sat down, waiting for them to finish visiting. When she left to find Emma and Diane, Dan asked, "What is it, Harry?"

"I need your help." Those were hard words to say coming from a young man who was not used to asking for assistance.

"Go on."

"I need you to purchase two fuel tanker trucks. Remus told me that the larger home delivery trucks would hold 3,500 gallons each."

"Go on." Dan knew that Harry was formulating his plan as he was speaking and chose not to interrupt.

"I need them filled, preferably with kerosene, or number one diesel if you can't get the kerosene. When you get them, I need them delivered to the castle as soon as possible, hopefully by tomorrow evening. I'll need them with big dispensing hoses so the kerosene can be dumped in less than seven minutes. Remus told me that he could drive one of the trucks."

"Go on."

"This is really important. They have to be at the castle by Monday night or Tuesday morning at the latest."

"Go on."

"I was also hoping that you and Emma could come stay there for a few days. Dr. Turnbull would be welcome too."

"I'll ask Diane when she gets up. Can I ask?"

“We’re pretty sure that Riddle is in the process of awakening an army of zombies. It’s likely that he will use this army to try and storm the castle.”

“OK, so what’s the kerosene for?” asked Dan, who had half guessed the answer, but wanted to hear it for himself.

“Bonfire.”

Dan took a deep breath, rubbed the bridge of his nose and said, “OK Harry, you have my undivided attention. What did you have in mind?”

“I’m planning on finding the direction that they are coming from, then soaking the grounds immediately before they arrive. When they are in the middle of the soaked field, I intend to light it.”

“Harry, how many of these zombies are there?”

“I wish I knew. We estimate a hundred or so.”

Dan shook his head, and said, “Harry, if your days are filled with these thoughts, I’d never want to live in your nightmares.”

Harry replied, “My best dreams are of... never mind.” They smiled at each other, and then Harry said, “Bill gave me these that you can use. He said not to lose them.”

Dan looked at the envelope and saw that it contained a dozen certified Barclay’s bank cheques with the amounts left blank. He had never seen open amount bank drafts guaranteed by a bank like that. Then again, he’d never known anyone nearly as wealthy as Harry. He simply said, “We’ll be there tomorrow evening.”

Harry replied “Thanks Dan.”

... --- ...

Fred grinned at Hermione as she looked around their workshop. The walls were scorched in places and there was a green slimy substance

on the ceiling. It was about what she had expected. Except for the large cabinet that housed their potions ingredients. It was pristine.

“To what do we owe the honor, Miss Head Girl?” He asked offering her a seat. Hermione was not silly enough to sit down in a chair she could feel the charm radiating off of.

“Order business,” she told him and he immediately got serious.

“What can I help with?” he asked.

She explained muggle accelerants and concluded, “We need a way of sparking a large quantity of it at once.”

“I believe that you came to the right men, my dear. How long do we have?”

“Tomorrow,” she replied. He nodded, not the least bit fazed by the deadline. She turned to leave after giving him a hug. He seemed surprised but hugged her back.

“You know,” she said in a conspirator’s voice while turning back. “If you were a little more surreptitious with the charm on that chair more people would sit down.”

He raised his eyebrows in question at her. She smirked and pointed her wand at the chair. The magic stopped pouring off of it. He was shocked when she pushed him into it. His spell was still active and the ropes wrapped around him in a snap.

He was yelling for George to help him when Hermione left.

... --- ...

Tonks shook her head and thought about his words for a moment. She scrunched up her nose, turned her hair lime green and said, “You’re going to start a fire with seven thousand gallons of petrol?”

“Not petrol, kerosene,” said Dan. “Petrol would blow up.”

“That’s my point! Are you sure that you’re not going to accidentally blow up or set the castle on fire?”

Harry was adamant. “What if there are two hundred inferi rather than a hundred? The Order and the older kids in the DA might be able to handle fifty or maybe even a hundred inferi. I don’t want another situation where we go up against two hundred of his creatures, kill or capture sixty or seventy and lose thirty of our people. I’d rather spend our way through this and make the score a hundred to nil.”

“It’s a bad idea Harry,” replied Tonks, thinking of how fast the plan could go south. She looked at Hermione for support not realizing that it was mostly Hermione’s idea.

“No. It’s a gutsy move that has some risk,” suggested Remus. “You’ll need to have the fire far enough away from the castle to minimize the risk to the stonework. What you don’t know is which direction they’re coming from.”

“True. Even if we guess wrong in the big area, I’m all but sure that they won’t cross the ring of fire.”

“You’re probably right,” said Dan, “but the kerosene won’t burn for more than five or ten minutes.”

“It’s something,” said Remus. “It would also illuminate the area enough to try to fight them through other means. How much will it cost?”

“Probably a hundred and fifty thousand pounds or so.” He looked at Harry and asked, “Is that all right?”

Harry nodded. In truth he had expected the trucks alone to cost that much.

Dan quipped, “It probably makes sense to get used trucks. They might not last a very long time given your plans for them.”

“It would be hard going back to the lorry shop telling them that some monster tore off the tires and ate them.” For some reason, all three

men found this to be hilarious. The women just shook their heads in disbelief.

“So how about those wedding plans?” asked Harry smiling at Tonks and trying to change the subject.

“We’ve decided to hold the ceremony on Boxing Day,” said Tonks. She poked him in the side and finished with, “At least if I can get you bunch to hold still.”

“Would you like to hold the reception here?” asked Hermione. From what she had seen of Tonks’ guest list most of them had access to the house already so the Fidelus charm would not be an issue. Portkeys could be issued to the rest.

“Yes, very much if you wouldn’t mind?” replied Tonks. The lower level would be a wonderful place to hold a reception of the size that they were likely to have. She had hoped, but hadn’t the nerve to ask Harry to use his home.

It suddenly occurred to Harry that a lot of people would be alive today if he’d made the same offer to Bill and Fleur. Hermione, who’d been thinking the same thing, looked at her lover and saw the unwarranted look of guilt in his eyes. She said, “It was their choice Harry. You had no say in the matter.”

“I could have offered...”

“And they wouldn’t have accepted.”

Dobby walked in and said, “Harry Potter, sir.”

“Hi Dobby.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Weezey is here.”

... --- ...

Dan and Emma arrived Tuesday at noon. It had taken longer than expected to purchase the two trucks, fill them and drive them to the

castle. Remus and Diane had driven the other truck and arrived at about the same time. Dan and Emma both enjoyed getting out of the house for a while. While it certainly was comfortable, it wasn't home.

At the castle Minerva passed them off as visiting physicians who were visiting with Madam Pomfrey and referred to them as Dr. Diane, Dr. Emma and Dr. Dan to avoid any leaks regarding their identity.

She also had a very stern talk with two of her Gryffindor students about keeping to their own business.

... --- ...

When Emma, while researching Horcrux creation, had quietly mused out loud to her daughter that a chance to speak to Dumbledore would be invaluable she never dreamed that she would have the conversation. As she sat in the headmistress' chair speaking with a painting of the man she was having trouble wrapping her head around the concept.

The painting had all of Dumbledore's memories up to finding the ring. He knew how the live Dumbledore had planned to destroy the ring. He did not know what had gone wrong.

Flitwick listened to Emma question the painting and was treated to what Hermione would be like in a few years. While the younger Granger tended to ask questions about everything, Emma's questions were pointed, probing and a little better thought out. She had a muggle notebook full of notes and ideas and used them as a reference.

Dumbledore's painting was amused. In life Hermione had been a favorite of his. Her quest for knowledge had amazed the old wizard occasionally. The painting's eyes twinkled as the muggle woman interrogated him. When she finally wound down Flitwick chuckled a little louder than he meant to.

"Quite right. Dr. Granger, it is obvious where your daughter's love of knowledge came from. How are she and her friend Mr. Potter doing?"

Dumbledore asked. If Emma was surprised by his inquiry she didn't show it.

"She is stressed out. Worried about Harry. He's... worried about everything," Emma answered.

"Minerva has told me of their relationship. I always thought they would be good together. Sometimes she is the only one he will listen to," Dumbledore said. The twinkle was gone from his eyes as he finished his thought, "Neither of them can even look at me when they are in the office so I make it a point to leave my frame. Will you tell them I asked after them?"

"Of course. Thank you for the information Professor," Emma said standing up.

"Thank you, Dr. Granger. I enjoyed our conversation. You are welcome to come speak with me anytime you wish," Dumbledore told her. His eyes were twinkling again. She smiled and wished that she could have had tea with the enigmatic old man.

... --- ...

On Wednesday Emma and Diane followed Hermione through her day. They had charms in the morning and arithmancy in the afternoon. They found charms to be absolutely fascinating as the work was quite visual. The class was charming statues to dance. After Hermione's statue waltzed with Neville's it sat down and rubbed its toes.

Arithmancy with the theory of spell modification was dead boring to most of the students, but Hermione seemed glued to Professor Vector's every word. Emma found it interesting that Hermione, Padma and Lisa Turpin seemed to be the only students paying close attention.

While the ladies were taking in classes, Dan and Remus paced off areas for dumping the fuel and looked at likely paths that an approaching army might take. Noting the hills on the school ground Remus charmed the truck tires to not get stuck. Dan knew that in the muggle world the tankers would never be able to run on the uneven

ground. In surveying the terrain it was apparent that they would either attack from the north or northeast.

... --- ...

Diane was in her room preparing to address a group of students that McGonagall had asked her to speak with. All had lost friends and family to the war. Diane was horrified at the number of students in the group. She introduced herself and talked a little bit about what she did. The children in the room assumed that she was a healer who specialized in head injuries. Through the conversation, she probed them a bit to understand how their basic needs were being met and asked if she could talk with them again.

She seemed like a nice witch, so they all agreed.

... --- ...

Hermione watched as Emma and Molly were the last members of the research team to enter the room of requirements. Emma greeted her with a quick hug. Hermione offered her the chair she had been sitting in and Emma gave her a smile.

Hermione surveyed the group. Susan, Padma, Luna, Flitwick, Poppy, Arabella, Diggle, Molly and Emma were gathered about the table. Tom and Sprout were working on other order business. She had expected it so she sealed the door and they got down to business.

"I asked Professor Flitwick and Dr. Emma to each find everything they could on Horcrux creation," Hermione began. "The Professor and I agreed that to figure out the best way to destroy them we would first have to understand how they are made."

Hermione had studied her mother's notebooks on Horcrux creation carefully. She had read Professor Flitwick's thesis sized report twice. She wished she had the time to read the books that they had referenced. Horcrux creation was fascinating in a macabre sort of fashion. She motioned to Emma to begin.

“Well as the Head Girl said, I’ve been reading up on Horcrux creation,” Emma said giving her daughter a look for the use of her title. Hermione just smirked. Emma continued, “I began with only the knowledge that it takes a murder to create one.”

I found the ritual of creation in a book called Immortality of Soul. There was no author indicated on the text and it was written in hieroglyphics and cuneiform. I translated the text,” she said ignoring the looks that she received. “It’s not surprising but there is much more to it than committing murder to create a horcrux. I didn’t understand until I found a breakdown of the spells.”

Emma slid a sheet of muggle paper to her daughter and asked her to put it on the white board. Then she approached the board and drew circles around two very complex portions of the arithmancy formulas.

“What is that?” Molly asked blinking a couple of times.

“It’s the arithmanic break down of the spells that he used. The first one is the bond. Those are the words to the spell,” Flitwick explained.

“Now I know why I love my kneazles,” Arabella commented.

“Surprisingly enough both of the Arithmancy Masters I know are squibs that were educated in muggle schools. Professor Vector told me that muggle born students do best in her class,” Flitwick said. Emma chuckled softly.

“Part of it is muggle science,” she said nodding to the board. She continued, “The first part is Calculus, the muggle branch of mathematics that deals with limits among other things. The third part looks like physics to me, which is the science of matter and energy.”

“You understand the arithmanic breakdown of these spells?” Diggle asked. His eyes were spinning like Moody’s magical eyes.

“Well, not all of it. The second pieces of each breakdown are magical indicators and I don’t know where to begin with them,” Emma paused a moment. “I’ve not taken a Calculus class since university. Even then I was hardly Isaac Newton. But I think these parts are key. This

one is the splitting process and this one is the spell that embeds the soul into the object. One of the scrolls I transcribed said that if the object releases the soul it would return to its owner. So as we destroy the Horcruxes it will make Voldemort stronger.”

No one spoke until Hermione cleared her throat and voiced the thought in each of their heads, “Unacceptable.”

“The documents we found in the Chamber of Secrets included some of this. You have much greater detail in your analysis than I did. I agree with your conclusions on the keys to the spells,” Flitwick said studying the board.

“I understand some of it. But I’ve never seen that one,” Hermione said pointing to one that didn’t seem to fit.

“That’s the killing curse,” Flitwick advised.

She stood up and approached the board. Flitwick, Padma and Luna came up next to her. They looked it over and began talking. No one had ever seen Luna that focused. Hermione grabbed the black marker and began to make notes over the spell breakdown. After a few minutes no one else in the room understood what they were talking about.

Emma turned to Molly and began speaking softly. She asked about Molly’s boys. Molly asked about Hermione and Harry and their classes. Susan and Arabella began to discuss breeding cats and kneazles. Poppy asked Diggle about his family.

The group at the board continued as if they were the only ones in the room.

After twenty minutes Luna suddenly grabbed a marker. She charmed it to write in an aquamarine color that vibrated on the board. She drew a couple of lines breaking the spells in to shorter pieces.

“Ooooh. Brilliant, Luna. If we break this...” Hermione said as she made some more notes on the board. Padma nodded excitedly and

picked up the blue marker. Flitwick levitated himself up and used his wand to point to different parts of the spells.

"If we reverse this part of the ritual using... What is the opposite for accipio?" Padma asked scribbling away.

"Recuso," Hermione and Flitwick answered in unison.

"And then..." Padma continued. She kept writing as the Professor and Hermione gave her suggestions. Finally they stopped.

"I believe that will break the fragment of Voldemort's soul from the physical objects and then banish it to the next world," Flitwick declared.

"I think we reinvented the wheel," Hermione commented uneasily as she looked at their work. She charmed the words at the top of the board. They had invented a new killing curse.

Avada recuso emoveo animus excessum

"Reject, to move away, soul, departure," Emma murmured roughly translating the Latin words. The avada part of the killing curse was what would rip the soul from the body or in this case the object.

"Brilliant," Padma declared.

"I agree, Miss Patel. 50 points to all three of you," Flitwick told them.

The girls smiled knowing that this year the race for the house cup was not an all-important thing. There were more important things in life.

"What about the Horcruxes that have been destroyed already? Were those soul fragments banished also?" Diggle asked.

"In viewing Harry's memory of the diary we believed that the basilisk venom was magical and poisonous enough to destroy it. Emma spoke with Dumbledore's painting earlier this week. He knew of the danger of the soul rejoining and was prepared to deal with it. If he

was unsuccessful that part has already joined Voldemort's body. I believe he was successful or Voldemort would have known that we knew about the Horcruxes and the snake would have never been left alone," Flitwick explained.

They discussed it for a little while longer and then Hermione called for Dobby and asked him to find Harry for her. As they waited Hermione copied the white boards to parchment and then banished the boards. The room of requirements expanded as the rest of the order members joined them. After everyone was settled Hermione began.

"We have created a spell that should remove Voldemort's soul from the objects and break the Horcruxes. It also banishes the soul fragment to the next world. Four different people should be involved in the destruction of the Horcruxes. It should be done at the same time in the same location. If one person is hurt doing it then the others will be able to finish. A fifth and maybe even a sixth person should be there just in case. Who is going to destroy the Horcruxes?" Hermione asked. It was a question that Harry had been thinking about for a while.

"I thought I would ask for volunteers," Harry told them. He took a sheet of parchment and offered it to the group. Hermione immediately put her name down, as did eighty percent of the room. Discussion broke out around the room on who was best qualified. Finally Molly used her well-honed yelling skills to get everyone's attention.

"I think Professor Flitwick, Hermione, Luna and Padma should do it. They invented the spell," she told the group.

"I will make a decision later," Harry told them. He didn't want Hermione anywhere near the destruction of the Horcruxes but if she were best qualified he knew she would have to do it. He also wanted Flitwick on the wall if they needed a charms master during the fight.

Hermione was about to speak up when a house elf popped into the room and approached McGonagall. The headmistress spoke to the elf and then looked at Harry.

“Minister Abraxan is on her way. She said it is urgent,” McGonagall told him. Harry nodded and McGonagall indicated to the elf that the minister was to be shown into the room.

Luna and Padma gathered up all of the parchment on the table and put it in Hermione’s pack. Hermione watched them and then took her bag. She charmed it so that no one but herself could get in it.

Abraxan took in the group with a keen eye. She knew that she was looking at what stood between Voldemort and the wizarding world.

“A muggle couple was brought into Saint Mungos three hours ago. Apparently they ran into Death Eaters while hiking. They managed to escape with their lives only because they were more familiar with the area than the Death Eaters. Both are severely traumatized. The woman, Mary, is awake but not coherent. Her husband is still unconscious. I would like them brought to the hospital wing here. Saint Mungos is not secure,” Abraxan explained.

“How did someone in the wizarding world take them Saint Mungos? I mean, how was it discovered that they were attacked by Death Eaters?” Dan asked.

“John Thomas sent someone to investigate spell signatures in an area that we’d been searching. The Aurors found them.”

“There is space in the hospital wing but I think it would be better to give them their own room,” Poppy told them.

“They can have the guest quarters next to Mr. Potter and Miss Granger’s quarters,” McGonagall said.

“Maybe we could get Dr. Diane to see them?” Harry asked Emma. Emma nodded agreeing to ask her.

“You said that the woman was not coherent. What was she saying?” Hermione asked.

“She was speaking English but the healers didn’t know what she was saying. Something about ‘zomblees’ and ‘horror movers monsters’,” Abraxan answered.

“Zombies?” Harry asked.

“What’s a zombie?” Molly asked.

“It’s what a muggle would call Inferi. Horror movie monsters...” Hermione muttered the last words and then shivered.

“We need to know what they saw and heard but I don’t want to add to their trauma. Let Dr. Turnbull talk to them before we make any rash decisions,” Harry said uneasily. He was remembering Dumbledore questioning him after he had returned with Cedric’s body.

Dan retrieved Diane from her room in the castle while Hermione and Emma set up the room for the muggle couple. Abraxan returned with the couple after an hour.

The man, Michael, was still unconscious. His wife watched as he was levitated into the bed. She seemed numb.

Diane watched as the woman looked around in fear. The room was quite dark and it was cold, as was the castle in most places. There was quite the crowd in the room.

“Hermione can you stoke the fire up? It’s too dark and cold in here. How about some light? Everyone else, except Madame Pomphery needs to leave,” Diane ordered not caring who was in the room.

Harry was amused as the minister of magic, the director of the MLE and the headmistress all obeyed the muggle woman without an argument. He stood up and followed them out.

Before Hermione left she told Diane that she would be right next door.

Three hours later Hermione left Harry sleeping in their bed to answer the door. Diane looked exhausted.

"I've told Mary about the pensive. She wants to see how it will work before agreeing," Diane said.

Hermione dressed in muggle clothes and then woke up Harry. Diane didn't seem to notice that they both came out of the same bedroom.

Diane introduced the teens to the muggle woman. The woman was clearly afraid of them. Hermione did her best to put her at ease by letting her ask questions and explaining what she could do to help. The woman was just beginning to relax when Hermione's head whipped towards the door.

"Someone's outside. I am going to go see what they want," Hermione told her. She saw the look on the woman's face and smiled softly, "I'm sure it's just one of the magical police inspectors wanting to question you. They can wait until you are ready."

Harry jumped out of his seat and followed her. They left the room and were back shortly.

"You're too nice Harry. They deserved detentions with Filch," Hermione was telling him. She explained, "Students out of bed after curfew."

"Filch retired, love. He can't make anyone clean the trophy room any more," Harry reminded her as he took his seat next to Mary's bed.

"Then detention with Hagrid. A trip in to the forest to meet Bane would cure them of mischief," Hermione grumbled. Harry laughed and it seemed to make Mary more at ease.

"Oh it cured us didn't it?" He winked at Mary. "First year we got into a spot of trouble and ended up with a detention with the groundskeeper. He took us into the Forbidden Forest to chase unicorns."

Hermione smiled more at the understatement than the memory.

"Unicorns?" Mary asked timidly.

“Beautiful creatures. Would you like to see one?” Hermione asked. Mary looked frightened and confused again. Hermione explained, “I can show you a memory of mine that includes unicorns. We studied them in our magical creatures class.”

Hermione motioned to the pensive that she had set on a bedside table. Mary watched as the girl put a stick to her head and pulled a shiny substance from it. She put it in the bowl and then tapped it with the stick.

The memory showed a much younger Hermione. The animals were beautiful. But the memory continued past them. When Draco Malfoy made a snarky comment about the animals not wanting to approach Hermione because of how filthy she was Harry gritted his teeth.

One of the unicorns let Hermione pet it and she smiled at the memory. Then the memory ended.

Harry looked over at Mary and then nodded to the pensive. “It’s as easy as that.”

“We can also go into the memory. It’s like standing in a movie. The trip in is a little disorienting though,” Diane explained.

Mary was staring at the bowl. She asked to see one of Diane’s memories and they watched as Dan Granger made a fool out of himself asking Emma out. Harry and Hermione got a good laugh at Dan’s longer hair and mustache.

Mary agreed to share her memory. Hermione explained what she needed to do and carefully removed the memory of them hiking in the Scottish highlands.

Mary and Diane didn’t enter the memory.

Harry looked around. The area seemed somewhat familiar. He saw the muggle couple not far from where they were standing. They were dressed for camping and standing by a lake.

"The water level is really low," Michael commented and Mary seemed to agree. They hiked a trail around the lake until they came upon two Death Eaters and a strange looking man that seemed out of place.

"Inferi," Harry said grimly. He scowled at Malfoy and then the former potions professor.

When the muggles were spotted Malfoy threw a bone-crushing hex at them. Mary howled as her arm shattered. The muggles took off running and eventually ended up in a cave. A large bush blocked the entrance.

"Where did they go?" the teens heard Snape demand.

"Maybe they apparated," Malfoy answered. He was breathing hard.

"They were muggles you foolish imbecile. Come on we need to get back to Dolohov's place. You will not mention this to anyone. The Dark Lord has been in a horrible mood since Potter stole his snake," Snape snapped at Malfoy.

"I can't believe he tricked us like that," Malfoy growled.

"You give Potter too much credit. The mudblood might have thought of it but she's too goody two shoes to act on such a brilliant plan. I'm positive it was John Thomas. He gave us a gift though. We now have a very good idea what the mudblood's parents look like," Snape explained as if Malfoy was slow-witted.

"You! Go back to your brothers and never speak of this," Malfoy ordered the two new recruits.

They heard the rustle of underbrush and then they heard Snape, "Incendio!"

"Think he'd listen to you?" Snape demanded just before he apparated away.

Hermione and Harry left the memory at that point. Harry left the room with a quick apology to the women. Hermione sat lost in thought.

After a couple minutes she returned Mary's memory to her and thanked her.

"If you need or want anything tell Diane and she will find me. No one here will hurt you, I promise," Hermione told her before she left.

She found the people she was looking for in the room of requirements. McGonagall, Moody, Abraxan and Thomas were listening to Harry. As Hermione took her seat Susan, Dan and Emma entered carrying some maps. After a little discussion Thomas left to tell the Aurors the area to search.

He returned just before breakfast was to begin with news.

He looked as exhausted as the rest of them felt as he spoke, "There were signs that a group had recently been in the area and walked away. A broomstick Auror battalion, patrolling the area to the northeast of here was fired upon yesterday from the ground. We believe the two events are related. We found a small burnt area next to a hidden cave. We found a short sword in the ashes."

"Any indication of the number of Inferi?" Harry asked.

Thomas replied grimly, "Most likely a few hundred. If they marched all night and made camp in the morning to stay out of the sun they could be here..." He looked at the map again and said, "The evening of October 31."

"So much for a quiet evening," quipped Harry who was sounding more like her dad than Hermione had previously noticed.

Hermione thought of the fire plan and swallowed hard. It was a lot easier when they were dealing with the theory of battle. She had to keep telling herself that the Inferi were not really alive.

McGonagall closed her eyes thinking about the children and parents who had put their trust in her to keep them safe. What if the castle was attacked? It had always been a possibility but with the Order systematically eliminating death eaters she thought that the threat had been abated. The children must be protected.

Emma wanted to grab Hermione and Harry and demand that they leave so that they could remain safe. Her mothering instincts were taking a beating by common sense.

Harry sighed heavily and began giving orders. Abraxan would pick up the two campers in the morning and have their memories modified.

... --- ...

The week was progressively more nerve wracking for Harry with each passing hour. He wasn't doing well in any of his classes. Flitwick and McGonagall took the situation into consideration and scheduled labs for the week. Members of the fifth, sixth and seventh year DA took shifts of one hour each in pairs to circle around the castle about a mile and a half out and 400 feet up on brooms. The job was pretty easy during the day, but bone chilling at night. Hooch took eight of the shifts herself, rotating on and off each hour. Several additional Aurors took up temporary residence in the castle.

... --- ...

Friday at sunset Hooch spotted them. She held her position to get an estimated count then silently swept off to the castle. Landing she ran into the great hall. Dinner was in full swing.

Harry and the others saw her go to McGonagall and knew that the time had come.

Minerva wasn't a great leader, but she was dead calm in the midst of a crisis. She stood and said, "May I have your attention? I need the first through fourth years to go to your common rooms immediately."

They had drilled this several times in the last month. There was no panic as they left. The little feet got up and within a minute had cleared the room. McGonagall looked around, sealed the doors, and said, "Mr. Potter, you have the floor."

"Madam Hooch, how far are they?"

“About three miles to the northeast. I counted about twelve hundred.” Those in the research group winced hard at the number. They’d anticipated an army of at most only a few hundred. Harry wished that he’d gotten a third truck. He immediately put those thoughts away and went into command mode. He said, “Alyx, contact the Minister immediately. The Aurors will need to evacuate Hogsmeade.”

“They’re welcome to come here,” said Minerva.

“No, the castle was infiltrated last time. Suggest sending them to Avebury. Bring in only those that you personally know. Be back in five minutes. Go. Madam Hooch, get the flyers ready. Richard, please go collect Hagrid. Gunner, get Fred and George. Tonks, go get Remus and Dan. Everyone put your body armor on. Horcrux team, be ready on my word. Go.”

The group stood as one for battle without a word.

... --- ...

The Division reached the edge of the forest a few minutes later. Riddle and about fifty Death Eaters met up with them by the train station. Riddle said, “Now is the time to fulfill your debt Commander. Storm the castle and kill all within who resist.

Tutui nodded. He looked at Riddle and said, “Win or lose, at the end of the battle, my men and I will have our peace. What will you have, soul-less one?”

Riddle’s red eyes glinted as he spoke. “You have your orders. Do your job.”

... --- ...

The main body of eight hundred men line up in sixteen rows of fifty men. Slightly ahead of the main body at either side like the top points on a W were two groups of a hundred men, each in ten rows of ten men. The remaining two hundred men were centered behind the main body in reserve. They had fashioned ladders for scaling the walls of the castle. Most carried bows as well.

Within the main body six hundred of the men were foot soldiers carrying the short sword. The other two hundred were skilled archers capable of pelting a targeted area with a blanket of deadly arrows.

Within a surprisingly short time, the men were in formation and began marching the final two miles to the castle.

... --- ...

As the army made its way to the castle, the Death Eaters torched several dozen of the buildings within Hogsmeade. When they had arrived, the entire town had already been evacuated, though in reality, the last residents had been evacuated only seconds earlier.

Snape and the newly recruited Death Eaters helped themselves to some gold and a few bottles each from the Three Broomsticks. They hurried back to join the army.

... --- ...

The broom riders were doing an excellent job. They were silently flying at 400 feet and were disillusioned to avoid being seen from the ground. In the growing darkness, they remained unseen, each reporting back to the Astronomy tower every few minutes.

When it became certain that Hogwarts was the target and the attack on the village was merely a feint, Dan and Remus got into the trucks. Each was aided by several Order members; they drove around dumping their load of kerosene as they went. Remus, Bill and Alyx were in one truck. Remus drove in a circle around the castle about a hundred yards out. Alyx and Bill held the big hoses as they poured the kerosene onto the ground. It took longer than they had expected. Several times they were hurried on by the flyers. Since they had extra fuel, they also made a quick pass about two hundred yards out by the area that Dan was soaking.

Dan drove the other truck back and forth in an area about 200 yards wide and about fifty yards deep. Like the other truck, the broom riders who knew that the army would be there at any moment hurried them

along. He drove over a wider area than originally planned to accommodate the larger army and hoped that it was being applied thickly enough to be effective.

Taking Dan's suggestion, after being unloaded, both trucks were shrunk, picked up and carried into the castle. After the six of them had come in, the massive oak doors were closed and the cross pieces were put in place. The DA was divided between being in the courtyard in case the main door was breeched and up on the battlements to ward off the attackers. They hadn't been advised of the kerosene plan, but were simply told to do nothing until commanded.

... --- ...

The Folgards, a handful of the shop owners and Rosmerta were directed into one of the classrooms and told to remain there. Harry was happy that they were safe but didn't need the distraction.

Fred asked George and Neville to help him move the huge boxes of fireworks up to the battlements at the top of the castle's outer wall. "Aye, be careful with them Neville. They'll make our last little firework display seem like nothing." Neville and George carefully carried the boxes up the winding stairs.

"Put them over there, and cover them with this," said George, handing him a tarp.

Neville asked, "What else can I do?"

George replied, "Just wait, like everyone else."

... --- ...

Tutui marched the division up to the castle in a surprisingly short amount of time. The centurions had done their jobs well directing their individual groups of men. Anticipating that the enemy within the castle would shoot arrows at them or pelt down rocks or other projectiles at them, the men clustered together with the men in the front row holding their rectangular shields in front of them while the men in the

middle held their shield over their heads. The classic tortoise defense had served them well over many battles, though it did tend to block their ability to see what the enemy was doing. As such the different pods were positioned quite close to each other as they marched double speed onto the front lawn.

Harry, Fred and George watched carefully as the division crossed the outer ring then was walking onto the soaked field. So far the plan had worked exactly as planned. The main body was dead center in the soaked ground and the leading groups were just approaching the fringes.

At about the same time Harry and Tutui each shouted, "Fire." From the ground arose a blanket of arrows flying upward. The first volley hadn't yet hit their targets when the second volley had been launched.

From the castle flew a dozen fireworks. Several were aimed skyward to illuminate the area while the others were fired at seemingly random areas on the ground.

... --- ...

Severus Snape hadn't become a Potions Master without some physical skills to back him up. Standing in the back with Riddle and the Engineers, he caught the faint aroma of kerosene. A moment after Tutui said, "Fire," he saw the fireworks ignite and the realization of the trap that they had walked into hit him. Grabbing Riddle's arm he hissed, "Run."

Whoosh!

The fireworks exploded onto the ground simultaneously starting hundreds of fires that linked up into a gigantic fire wave within a single second. The flames were easily twenty feet high. The heat wave knocked Fred and George off of their feet.

Riddle and Snape had almost reached the outer fire ring at the instant that it ignited. With their shoes and the hems of their robes soaked in kerosene, both men were badly burned as they crossed the final fifteen feet of the fire.

... --- ...

The main body of the army was not so lucky. Within seconds, over nine hundred of the inferi were on the ground in flames. Those that fell to the ground soaked themselves in the flaming liquid sealing their fate. Because of the forward and rear rings that Lupin had made, the fire was seemingly everywhere. No one knew how to escape.

The sight and sounds were horrible. Several of the students had ignored Harry's call to get down and were shocked by the massive carnage clearly visible in the bright firelight. The painted birch shields ignited like kindling, cremating those that were in the middle within a few minutes. A hundred yards away up on the battlements Harry and the others' faces felt like they had a bad case of sunburn.

... --- ...

Most of the fifth, sixth and seventh year students were in the open courtyard or on the various battlements. At least a dozen of the students had been hit by the first hail of arrows. The second stream of arrows had been just as accurate, some hitting new students, most hitting students with a second or third arrow.

The Healer group of the Order quickly went to work, gathering up those who had been hit. Emma was out in the courtyard helping Molly with Allie and Katlyn when she saw Hermione get hit in the back from a flying arrow.

To her absolute astonishment, the arrow bounced off and entangled itself in the hem of her robe. She made a note to herself to tell her daughter to ravish the young man who had bought her the body armor. Hermione conjured stretchers for Katlyn and Allie and rushed them up to the hospital wing. Both had been hit with arrows and had punctured lungs.

... --- ...

On the ground, Tutui's swordsmen were in a panic. A few tried to run through the fire, while most tried unsuccessfully to avoid it. Some of

the engineers and most of the archers were substantially unhurt, while the footmen were almost all dead. "Keep firing," shouted Tutui. They loosed another flight of arrows. For nearly two minutes they fired a continuous flight of arrows until they had fired a third of their supply. The reserves were mostly archers who were commanded to fire with the others, though at a slower pace.

... --- ...

On the battlements, Harry and two dozen others hunkered down. Harry had created a metal shield like the one that McGonagall had taught them. One arrow glanced off of it while another hit it with a solid clang. When the arrows had subsided, Harry stood and shouted, "Reducto."

The laminated birch shields were no match for the magical blasts and the spells had nearly the same range as the archers who were disadvantaged due to having to fire upward forty feet. As the flames subsided and the darkness grew, the engineers carried the great ladders up to the castle. Of the ten ladder teams four had made it as far as placing the ladder against the castle. Several of the soldiers had reached the top only to be blasted with Reducto charms. Flitwick vanished the ladders causing the soldiers to fall to the ground.

... --- ...

Riddle watched in mounting rage as the majority of the inferi and almost all of his Death Eaters were killed in the first thirty seconds of the battle. His legs were as badly burned as Snape's. Lucius, Draco and Dolohov had been in the rear hiding some gold that they had found at the Three Broomsticks and hadn't been injured.

... --- ...

Hermione was focused on the wounded students so intently that she had not noticed the ache in her back right away. She had just returned from taking the Greystone sisters to the hospital wing when she realized that she was hurt. Ignoring it she rolled her shoulders and kept moving.

She changed positions from the courtyard to one of the battlements. The DA and Order members in the courtyard had shielded themselves adequately and the injuries were becoming fewer.

The darkness made it extremely difficult to work. They could not create light as it would give the archers a target to aim at. She couldn't even identify the student that was at her feet. She made a snap decision and grabbed the student closest to her and quickly explained.

Lisa Turpin nodded at the head girl and grabbed her transfigured shield. They both moved away from the edge of the wall and Lisa sat down with her shield blocking most of her body.

Hermione conjured a small blue bell flame and an area of a one-foot circle was illuminated. Lisa levitated it out over the battlefield and Hermione pointed her wand at it once more. The flame grew. They could see the battlefield again and there was almost enough light to see what they were doing.

Hermione immediately went back to the wounded. She was ready to transport Dean, who had been hit in the leg, when Harry was suddenly beside her.

"It's time," he said. Hermione took a deep breath and then nodded. She handed Dean off to Sprout. The older woman had heard Harry and knew what was about to happen.

Hermione touched Harry's cheek gently.

"I love you," she told him softly.

"And I love you. Please be careful," he told her. She nodded again and put her wand to her throat.

"Sonorus," she said. She saw her mother fighting with a large wound on a student.

"Team H, meet me inside. It's time," Hermione shouted. Emma looked up and their eyes met.

The DA members had no idea what she was talking about and ignored her. Padma, Hagrid, Luna, Susan and Bill started for the door. Hermione grabbed Harry and kissed him hard and then left quickly. Both her parents and her Godmother had heard her and each said a short prayer for the six people leaving the battle.

Hermione pulled a piece of parchment out of her robe and let each member memorize it. Then she held up her arm and motioned to her bracelet. The portkey took them to the hills outside Hogsmeade.

"What is this place?" Padma asked as they entered the cave.

"The hideout of Sirius Black," Hermione told her as she approached one of the walls. The concern of Voldemort summoning the Horcruxes had been overwhelming. Moving them from the castle had happened in the middle of the night. Only she and Harry knew that they had been moved.

She tapped it in six places and an opening not unlike the one in Diagon Alley appeared.

The Horcruxes were all there. Harry had been stunning the giant snake twice a day. Hagrid stunned the beast again.

As planned they laid them out in a wide circle on the floor. Bill set up a series of protections around the circle. Then he and Susan took up positions at the opposite ends of the cave. They held their wands at the ready.

Hermione nodded at each of the others and then took a deep breath.

"Avada recuso emoveo animus excessum"

She spoke the spell and moved her wand in the form of the infinity symbol as they had practiced. In her mind she was thinking of all that had been lost. Intent was not an issue in this spell making it even more dangerous than the killing curse.

A greenish light flew from her wand. It was not the same shade of green as the killing curse. This spell was more blue than green. It hit the putter's head, which broke into large chunks.

The others watched as a burst of magic flew at Hermione. The wards Bill had set up stopped most of the magic but a small portion broke through. Hermione had begun to move seconds after she cast the spell. Voldemort's protection missed her by inches, instead hitting the wall behind her.

The wall exploded. Gravel and dust flew everywhere. A large chunk of rock hit Hermione's cheek. It was her only injury as her armor protected the rest of her body.

Hermione wiped her face and got to her feet. Above the putter floated a hazy image of a young Tom Riddle. The blue light of the spell surrounded it. The green part of the spell surrounded the pieces of the putter's head. Tom looked around and then began to scream as the blue light imploded in on him. It sizzled to a small ball of light and then with a loud bang it vanished. The green light faded.

Bill reinforced the wards.

Padma went second. The locket snapped open. Tom Riddle as he must have looked twenty years ago was before them. Having seen what happened to Hermione, Padma made it a point to fall down the second she finished the spell. The killing curse missed her by a wide margin. The wall behind her exploded into dust.

The bang sounded the same as it had before.

Luna stared at the cup for a moment. She moved her wand and spoke the spell with the same far away look that she always wore. The cup shattered into tiny pieces except for the handle. A just graduated Tom Riddle floated up surrounded by blue haze.

Luna dived left when the spell was complete. A ball of fire flew at the spot Luna had been. Her shoes were scorched. Again Tom Riddle disappeared with a bang.

Hagrid pointed his wand at the snake. The wand was newly acquired since his being cleared of all charges. Hagrid had an apology signed by the Minister of Magic hanging on his wall.

He spoke the spell and watched as the snake burst into flame. His large body moved at what seemed to be a horribly slow pace as he tried to move out of the way of the path of whatever would be coming. Then nothing happened. Everyone watched the Voldemort that they were familiar with rise. The blue light cast a glow around the room. This time the bang was more pronounced.

"Guess he thought that keeping the snake with him would be enough protection," Bill said without humor.

Hermione conjured a wooden box and banished the horcrux remains to it. Bill shrank the box and pocketed it. He was about to speak again when they heard a loud rumble.

"Apparate to Honeydukes," Hermione shouted as the walls began to cave in.

Six pops were followed by a roar as the cave collapsed.

As luck would have it, Honeydukes, one of the few buildings still standing, was deserted. Padma examined Luna's slightly burnt legs and feet while Susan looked over Hermione's cut. They took the portkey back to the school and ended up in the Great Hall. Bill gave Hermione the box.

Hermione rushed out with the others on her heels. The group burst onto the battlement less than ten minutes after they had left. They each took up their previous positions without a word to those fighting around them. Hermione found Harry firing a series of reducto curses at the battlefield.

"It is done," she told him after he finished.

"Everyone okay?" He demanded looking her over.

“Nothing life threatening,” she reported. He nodded and looked relieved. With one more look he turned back to the battle and she went back to the wounded.

Lisa Turpin was still holding the light in place. She was shaking from the effort. Hermione broke the spell and then conjured a stretcher for the exhausted girl. She hoped that the ten minutes of light had helped.

A few minutes later she levitated Lisa and three other students to the hospital wing.

...---...

Suddenly Riddle felt dizzy. Despite his burns he sat down. For several minutes he could remember nothing. Finally he shook his head and made an effort to focus. He saw the flames and the castle and remembered, ‘Potter. Potter was the enemy.’ His hatred brought everything into clarity. He pointed his wand at the battlement and fired the killing curse. He fired it again. The jet of light didn’t seem to be quite as bright as the previous one.

Malfoy and the others saw the Dark Lord firing at the castle and began doing the same thing. After ten minutes they too had tired slightly and took a break.

Snape got up and carefully aimed his wand before muttering “Reducto.” From 200 yards the spell’s aim was nearly true. It hit the stone battlement inches away from Harry sending stone chips at him at bullet velocity. He was knocked off of his feet having been hit with at least a dozen of them, but got up a few seconds later, grateful for the protective armor.

Seeing that he was all right, the other Order members and the DA members on the battlements fired Reducto charms in the direction that they had seen the lights come from. One hit Travers just below the hip shattering his femur and hit an artery. He bled out within a minute before Snape could reach him.

... --- ...

Shortly before midnight it was obvious that Tutui's division had been decimated, and the five wizards left the battlefield to heal themselves. Riddle made no effort to find the other Death Eaters, instead he left them on the ground to get back on their own, die or be captured.

Snape, both Malfoy's and Dolohov figured that the Dark Lord would take his anger out on them. All of them were shocked and relieved when instead, Riddle went to his private room to heal himself and didn't return.

... --- ...

The battle raged through the night with arrows and spells passing each other back and forth. Tutui lacked the forces to storm the castle and their only offense was that of the highly skilled archers.

The stench of flaming flesh and the burning kerosene was overpowering and seemed to waft skyward. The archers continued firing even as their numbers were slowly diminished.

About midnight Fred and George let loose an almost continual barrage of fireworks. Harry had positioned everyone who could fire a Reducto charm on the battlements. As one they took aim and launched the explosive charm against anyone that was in range. One of the blasts hit Tutui severing one of his legs just above the knee. In the rear third of the division when the fire started, he had been badly burned by the fire. By three AM only a few dozen archers remained. The swordsmen had mostly taken up bows from those who had fallen as their swords were on no use against the thick walls.

At four AM six of the remaining swordsmen had silently put the last of the ladders up against the castle. Three of the soldiers made it to the top of the battlement. Neville fired a blast as Dan emptied his pistol at the approaching soldiers knocking two of them off of their feet. Unfortunately they had tried to stop the same soldiers. The third reached Neville and hit him in the side with a slicing motion before Remus finished them off with Reducto blasts and vanished the last of the ladders.

Remus ran up to Neville who was on the ground bleeding. He shouted, "Healer!"

Neville opened his eyes and winced. He was in pain.

"Don't move, Neville."

Dan ran over to help. He'd seen the exchange and expected to see the teen on the ground disemboweled. Instead there was a pound note sized red mark on the left front side of his white shirt. He smiled and asked, "Neville, are you wearing one of those sets of wonderful body armor?"

Neville nodded.

Dan said, "Good. You'll live to thank Harry for them. He gave me one too and it came in very handy."

Pomfrey ran up the stairs as fast as she could and saw Longbottom on the ground. For a moment, her heart leapt until she surveyed the scene. Like Dr. Granger, she smiled when she saw him feet away from the other three soldiers. Dan removed his shirt and Remus opened the vest. There was a skin deep cut about five inches long across his abdomen. With three careful waves of her wand Healer Pomfrey cleansed and closed the wound. She looked at him and said, "Normally I'd put you in a hospital bed for the rest of the evening Mr. Longbottom, but given the circumstances, you'd best remain at your post."

She shuddered as she looked at the three fallen soldiers, fascinated by their garb, yet revolted by the thought of what they'd become. Ten minutes later, Neville was back guarding the battlements with the others. Harry and several others came over, alerted by the sound of Dan's pistol, saw that things were under control and went back to their own areas.

... --- ...

On Harry's suggestion, Minister Abraxan had kept the Aurors away from the castle, instead having them guard the displaced residents of

Hogsmeade. There was too much risk of friendly fire in the darkness, and it had become apparent that there was little real risk of the castle being breached. She had used the floo to firecall several times, but stayed away as they had recommended.

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Word had reached the Daily Prophet that Death Eaters had destroyed the village of Hogsmeade and a few survivors had been moved to safety. Reporter Whiteheart had been dispatched to Avebury to interview the suffering citizens to find that the Aurors had already provided them with temporary shelters and food. Abraxan and John Thomas had done a fantastic job planning for the event.

Thinking that she had the main story, she stayed there until just before dawn when she overheard two of the Aurors talking about that attack at the castle.

She immediately apparated to Hogsmeade station.

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With the first light came the renewed moaning of the wounded and burned that had lasted through the night.

At seven there was enough light to distinguish colors and see detail. Harry made the decision that the Order would go out and finish off the mortally wounded.

Despite McGonagall's threats of detention, several hundred students made their way to the battlements and the astronomy tower. As such they witnessed the end of the Triarii division. Harry, Remus and a dozen of the fighting team opened the massive castle doors and walked outside.

"Harry, finish them off," said Remus quietly. "They don't belong here and you would be doing them a favor."

"I know," replied Harry. "Give me a minute." He had never executed anyone before.

Commander Tutui saw the exchange and did his best to stand. Helped up by his archers, he held out his sword, presenting it sideways with both hands, palms up, by the blade to the young commander in a sign of surrender.

“Take it,” said Remus.

Harry walked up to the commander from two millenniums past, made eye contact and held out both hands to accept the sword. Tutui handed Harry his sword, nodded as one commander to another and his men lined up side by side next to him.

Remus, Lee, Neville, Dan, Alyx and the others walked up to the defeated soldiers and accepted their arms. Each nodded to his or her counterpart. They took a few steps back, nodded one last time and fired their spells or in Dan’s case the muggle gun. Up in the battlements several students had been taking photos of the exchange.

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While Harry was outside with Tutui, McGonagall was watching closely from the front door. Bodies were littered all over the front lawn of the castle.

Abraxan and all of the Aurors along with what appeared to be half of the Ministry portkeyed to the closest spot. She watched in absolute fascination at the final exchange between Harry and the Inferi Commander. After Tutui and the others had been hit, the bodies of all of the inferi began to rapidly decay. Within a few minutes their armor and swords had rusted into dust. Only the weapons that Tutui and the other soldiers had personally handed over remained in pristine condition. Within five minutes the only bodies remaining on the lawn were the blackened remains of the forty-five Death Eaters.

The smell of burnt flesh remained.

Up in the battlements, Molly, Diane and Emma watched in absolute fascination as her daughter’s lover ended a magical battle. As Harry

and the others turned to walk back to the castle, Hermione, Luna and a dozen others raced out and hugged their loved ones.

“Harry, you were brilliant!” screamed Hermione. “I was so scared for you.”

From above came the sound of 350 cheering students joined in by all of the others.

Harry and Hermione held on to each other tightly. Neither wanted to let go and face what was yet to come.

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Chapter 22

Nov 1 - 7:30 AM

Minerva McGonagall rarely swore. She thought it was bad taste for a lady to have something like that in her mouth let alone letting it slip out. When viewing the crowd that had just crossed onto the blackened battlefield snapping photographs she let out a string of curse words so long and loud that she knew her late husband would be spinning in his grave.

The Ministry had arrived in force.

Diane glanced at her and then said, "Please, tell us how you really feel."

Susan looked at Diane as if he were expecting her to be transfigured into a goat but Minerva chuckled.

"I cannot tell them to leave. Parents are going to be upset enough without some nameless ministry hacks adding to their worries with whatever lie they get the Prophet to print this week," Minerva groused. The Headmistress, Emma, Diane and Susan watched the crowd for a couple of minutes. The leaders of the battle, having just accepted the weapons of their enemies, were being swarmed.

Diane thought for a moment and then asked if McGonagall minded her seeing what she could do. McGonagall didn't think that anything less than hexing them would make them leave. She nodded to Diane who turned and walked outside. She heard Emma snicker and threw a three-fingered wave over her shoulder.

Diane surveyed the scene. Harry and a few of the others were being mobbed by the Ministry officials, Aurors, and the like. Everything that she knew about the teen screamed that he just wanted to be left alone. Dan must have thought so too because he was doing his best to stay between the crowd and Harry.

Harry scowled at a particularly forward witch who had given Hermione a shove so that she could take a turn hanging on him. For

a moment, Diane feared for the offending witch's life. However, Harry just grabbed Hermione by the hand, helped her up, and the two left the ministry officials open mouthed as they turned for the castle. The crowd made to follow but Abraxan stopped them.

Diane approached the group and offered her hand to Minister Abraxan. The Minister had not been offended in the least when Diane had tossed her and the others out of the Renny's rooms when she was trying to talk with the frightened campers. They had spoken a few times and the Minister had sat in on one of the student sessions that Diane had held.

The leaders of the battle went into the castle, except for Dan. He was glowering at the crowd holding a pistol and a sword in his hands. After a few moments he too turned to leave. Diane noted that he had waited for Harry and Hermione to safely pass through the giant doors.

"May I have a moment of your time?" Diane asked the Minister. Anyone watching would have never known that the witch intimidated Diane.

"Of course," Abraxan said walking with her. Like a herd of sheep, most of the group followed.

Diane frowned at them and asked, "Alone?"

She could have sworn that Abraxan told them to 'sit and stay' just in her tone of voice. Diane walked out of earshot and Abraxan joined her a few moments later. John Thomas was with her. She nodded to the intimidating, silent man.

"I know you both want to speak to Harry and the rest of the key people in this horrible battle. Everyone is exhausted, emotionally as well as physically. I understand that you need information, but right now..." she stopped speaking as Abraxan held up her hand.

"I understand, Doctor. I'm willing to wait as long as Mr. Potter needs."

"It would help to lose the rubbernecks," Diane told her with a frown. She could tell that Abraxan didn't understand the muggle reference.

Instead of explaining the disorder of gawking at an auto accident she asked, "How many of those people have a justifiable reason for being here?"

"Most of them have no reason other than their self grandiose important image," Thomas told her.

"Then I suggest that they leave. We all know that Harry is less than interested in politics and couldn't care less what those people think. He respects you two," Diane informed them.

"He told you that?" Thomas asked with a frown of his own.

"He didn't have to," Diane replied. She turned to leave and finished, "It will be several hours before anyone is ready to relive this mess. You are welcome to wait."

Abraxan spoke to Thomas and then followed Diane who was walking slowly. She caught the muggle easily.

Emma saluted her when she returned and Diane snickered at her friend. Exhaustion was making them act like they had in their university days. The three muggles left Abraxan with the Headmistress as she went in search of something hot to drink and a warm bed. Dan told her that the kids had gone to bed.

She went back to her room, showered and changed out of her blood stained clothing. She sat down and closed her eyes for what felt like a minute. When she woke an hour later, Diane discovered that Abraxan had returned to the Ministry. No one had seen Harry or Hermione. McGonagall was sure they had not left the castle. Moody had his own opinion.

Dan and Emma were concerned to the extreme. Diane suggested that they get some sleep. Emma's giddiness had worn off and she snapped at her friend. Diane didn't take it personally and was not surprised when Emma's anger turned into tears.

It was a while before she left Emma in Dan's arms knowing that he could do more with a hug than she could with hours of work. She

wandered the deserted halls of the castle. McGonagall had sent all of the kids to their dorms with strict warnings about leaving. Diane hoped that they listened better than they had during the battle.

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8:30 AM

The hospital wing was quiet.

Master Healer Poppy Pomfrey surveyed her hospital wing and was satisfied with what she saw. She had only kept the most grievously injured patients. The rest had been escorted back to their dorms with instructions to go to bed.

She had three patients and they were all asleep.

Diane Turnbull wandered in and checked up on how things were going. Poppy assumed that she was on an errand for Potter. Diane was relieved to hear that none of the students had perished. The Healer explained to the Doctor about the three that were left.

Dean Thomas had been hit in the leg with one of the arrows. It was not such a debilitating injury that he should have been in the hospital wing. However after having his leg healed he had returned to the battle and managed to undo the bone knitting and the muscle regrowth. Poppy was not sure if he was brave or stupid.

Fred Weasley had hit his head when the flash fire had knocked him over. He had fought with a minor concussion and a pretty bad case of red face. She kept him simply because she didn't want to think about how George would wake him every hour.

Her last patient was the one that worried her the most.

Katlyn Greystone was still having trouble breathing. Her punctured lung had been healed but she was short of breath. Poppy knew that it was a combination of the sickening smoke and nerves. There was a reason that the fourth years and below had been sent back to the

houses. Katlyn was not the youngest student to sneak out of the dorms and into the battle but she had been hurt the worst.

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1:00 PM

Headmistress Minerva McGonagall stared out the window of her office. The day was crisp, bright and beautiful. The children should have been outside on the pitch playing Quidditch or sitting by the lake with their friends.

Instead the castle was on complete lock down.

The former head's portraits had been told of the battle. Dumbledore had praised the originality of the plan. Phineas had been disgusted that they had resorted to using a muggle trap regardless of the outcome. McGonagall took both as good signs.

Her discussion with the Minister had been brief but full of information. The news of the battle would spread quickly. The wizarding wireless was already reporting horribly erroneous news from people that had allegedly been at the battle. The rumors had to be squashed.

After the gargoyle informed her of a visitor, she gave Diane permission to enter her office and watched as the muggle woman took her seat. They didn't speak, instead sat sipping the tea and listening to the wireless.

"We interrupt to bring you to the Minister of Magic. Minister Abraxan will be giving a statement on the tragedy at Hogwarts," the announcer's voice said, interrupting the interview with a low-level ministry official whose fifteen minutes had been cut short.

"Good afternoon. As you know last night at dusk Lord Voldemort and his supporters attacked Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. His forces included approximately fifty Death Eaters and an estimated twelve hundred Inferi. The bodies of forty-six of the Death Eaters have been recovered. All of the Inferi were defeated by an amazing contingency plan put in place by the Headmistress.

I have heard rumors of the number of students killed in the raid. Let me put the rumors to rest. None of the students were killed. As a matter of record, many of them helped defend the castle. As of ten o'clock this morning only three of the students injured remain in the hospital wing at the school.

In all thirty students were injured and treated. Headmistress McGonagall has invited the parents of the students who were hurt to come to the castle to visit their children.

Headmistress Minerva McGonagall has been and will continue to work with an elite security force that has been in place since just after the funeral of Albus Dumbledore. The school remains on lock down. No one will be allowed in with the exception of the parents who will be arriving by portkey later today.

The village of Hogsmeade was also attacked. Invading forces destroyed almost half of the town. Fortunately there was enough warning that all residents were evacuated before the attack.

The identity of the Death Eaters is problematic as most of the bodies were charred in a large fire on the school grounds. Only two of them have been identified. They were Peter Travers and Delores Umbridge. Travers was hit by a reducto curse and at no point was near the fire. At the beginning of the battle Umbridge fled into the Forbidden Forest where a rather large group of acromantulas was watching the battle. The acromantulas killed her but refused to suck her husk dry."

Diane was surprised to see Minerva smile.

"Her body was discovered when one of the acromantulas approached the Care of Magical Creatures Professor to get the taste of biting her out of its mouth," Minster Abraxan concluded.

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2:00 PM

Eventually Diane found herself in front of the door leading to Harry and Hermione's suite. She gently knocked, thinking they were asleep and no one would answer. A few seconds later Harry opened the door.

He let her in without saying a word. She followed him inside and watched him throw a couple spells at the closed door. He was wearing sweat pants and nothing else. She noticed that he had a number of light scars on his back. She wondered about them but didn't ask.

"Hermione's asleep," he told her rubbing the scar on his forehead.

"I didn't want to wake you," she started, but he waved her off.

"I was awake. What can I do for you?" he asked. She found a place to sit on the love seat. She was surprised when he sat down next to, not across from, her. On the table in front of them was the collection of weapons from the Inferi.

"The question is what can I do for you? I know you don't like the idea of therapy Harry. But you need to talk to someone. So does Hermione," Diane told him. The young man shook his head.

"Sometimes my life just spins out of control. It just happens," he said with a shrug. She watched him wrap his arms around his torso in a defensive position.

"Emma is very worried about both of you. She about bit my head off for suggesting she get some sleep. Can I tell her that you two are at least talking to each other?" Diane asked.

"Sure, if you don't mind lying," Harry said sardonically. When she didn't respond he kept talking to fill the silence. "We talk about almost everything... but not this... never this."

"What is 'this'?" Diane asked.

"We don't talk about killing people," a familiar voice said from the bedroom doorway.

Hermione joined them dressed in a pair of men's boxers and a loose long sleeve t-shirt. Diane noted that the cut on her face had not been treated. Hermione wrapped herself in a blanket and sat in an overstuffed chair.

"Who have you killed?" Diane asked. Hermione didn't answer. After a moment Harry sighed.

"You didn't kill them, Hermione."

"I helped design the fire defense," she told Diane, who was getting more confused by the second.

"And it worked brilliantly," Diane replied not understanding what the problem was.

"I suggested using the accelerant. I helped plan the death of over a thousand people. Maybe I'll get lucky and they'll send me through the veil," Hermione said miserably.

"Don't say that," Harry snapped. Hermione pulled the blanket tighter.

"Harry, I killed..."

"You didn't kill them!" he yelled. Hermione flinched and burrowed deeper into her cover. Harry took a couple of deep breaths and then said, "I'm sorry."

"They weren't supposed to be that way. They were supposed to be mindless monsters," Hermione murmured, suppressing her tears.

"I know, but if they had gotten into the castle they would have killed us all. I know that and so do you. You did the right thing building a defense that they never saw coming," Harry told her.

"And you did the right thing ending the battle," Hermione returned.

“Neither of you believes a word the other one is saying do you?” Diane asked. The teens both looked at her having forgotten that she was in the room.

“I executed him,” Harry said softly. His arms tightened as he stared at the weapons on the table.

“It’s a war, Harry,” Diane told him. Harry looked away so she continued to speak, “He was a monster born from an evil man who raised him from the dead.”

Neither of the teens continued the conversation, both lost in their own thoughts.

“Let’s play a game,” Diane said. The kids looked surprised. She gave them a reassuring smile. “It’s called ‘what if...?’ I am going to start a thought and I want each of you to finish it.”

Neither of the teens objected so she continued, “What if Emma had decided that Hermione was not coming to this school?”

Both of the teens looked at her strangely and she shrugged.

“At the time I thought that Hermione had been accepted into a school for the gifted. Your Mum really didn’t want you to go away to school, Hermione. She knew she had to let you go or you would have never been happy. So what if she had decided that you were to stay at home?”

“Voldemort would have come back three years earlier,” Harry replied thinking about the stone that they had saved.

“I would be dead,” Hermione said shifting in her seat. She pulled her legs up under herself and hugged the blanket tighter.

“That’s a little harsh,” Diane told her but Hermione shook her head. She didn’t explain and Diane didn’t push it. Crookshanks hopped up on Harry’s lap and gave him a dirty look when he didn’t get petted.

“Okay. How about, what if one of you had been sorted into a different house?” Diane asked thinking about how some of the friendships she had seen seemingly ran along house lines.

“That almost happened. The hat wanted to put me in Slytherin. I begged it to put me in Gryffindor,” Harry answered.

“And what if that had happened?”

“Every seventh year boy Slytherin eventually became a Death Eater. I probably would have been murdered in my sleep before the troll attack, first year.”

“Hermione? What if you were in a different house?” Diane asked.

“A lot of people think that I should have been put in Ravenclaw. I just tell them that it takes a lot of bravery to bug the boy-who-lived about his homework,” Hermione answered avoiding the question.

“And if you were in Ravenclaw?” Diane asked not letting her get away with it.

“I would never have made such great friends.”

“Okay. Those are good answers and you both have good points. You can see how life is full of cause and effect?” Diane asked. Both of the teens nodded so she continued on, “What if... Dan had not killed that woman?”

She had posed the question to a very upset Emma not too long ago also. She hoped their reaction was not as strong as Emma’s had been.

“Then he wouldn’t be on top of Voldemort’s list,” Harry answered immediately.

“We would all probably be dead,” Hermione answered.

“Dan would not be on the top of Voldemort’s list? Do you really think that he and Emma would be in less danger?” Diane asked.

“Yes. He would not be actively seeking them,” Harry was adamant.

“How are you measuring the degree of danger? His daughter is helping to lead the fight against Voldemort. Isn’t that enough reason to go after them? Didn’t that LeStrange woman show up at their house in the middle of the day?”

Harry thought about it while Diane questioned Hermione.

“You would all be dead?” Diane asked.

“Yes. If Dad hadn’t stopped her when he did, she would have killed us all.”

“She was that bad?” Diane asked not comprehending completely. Hermione nodded but didn’t explain. Crookshanks had given up on Harry and hopped up on Hermione. Diane watched the strange cat for a moment and then continued.

“Let’s move on. What if you hadn’t come back to school this term?”

“The Inferi wouldn’t have attacked the school,” Harry said.

“You don’t know that. Voldemort would have probably attacked sooner. Plus, we would probably be on our own looking for the Horcruxes,” Hermione told him. Diane let them think about that for a moment then continued.

“What if you decided that it was too dangerous to light the fire last night and went with just firing spells?” Diane asked.

“We would have had major losses,” Harry answered.

Hermione didn’t answer. Instead she sank back in to the blanket. Crookshanks jumped down and glared at Diane as if it were her fault that Hermione was so upset.

“Hermione?” Diane prompted.

"I don't know," the girl with all the answers confessed. Tears were running down her face.

"Without the flash fire destroying most of the soldiers how many of the students would have died?" Diane asked. When Hermione didn't respond Diane asked, "Did you know that several of the creators of the atomic bomb became its biggest detractors? Why do you think that is?"

Diane posed the question to both of them but it was Hermione who answered, "They probably felt guilty."

"Do you feel guilty?"

"Of course I do. I wouldn't be human if I didn't," Hermione snapped. Diane nodded.

"That's what separates you from your enemies. You feel bad for taking their lives. They on the other hand will do everything in their power to kill you and everyone you love."

She let the silence settle then moved along.

"What if... Hermione, you had decided not to wear your armor to the wedding?"

Both of the teens flinched.

"I would be dead," Hermione answered.

"So would I," Harry replied.

"Explain, please," Diane inquired.

"I lost my best mate and my girlfriend. If Hermione had died, I would have given up," Harry told her honestly.

"Do you still think of giving up?" Diane asked. Harry shook his head.

“Not anymore. I have enough people behind me that I know we can win this war. I used to feel so alone,” Harry confessed.

“You’re a great leader Harry. That’s why people follow you,” Hermione told him. Silence fell again as they waited for Diane’s next hypothetical, but it never came.

“Nothing I can say will ever convince either of you that you did the right thing. You are going to have to find in yourselves to see it, but I want you to think about what would have happened if you hadn’t been here or if you hadn’t come up with such a brilliant defense. Just for the record I think that you did the right thing.”

Hermione hugged her knees to her chest and Harry stared into space. Diane let them think as she approached her next question carefully. In the end she decided to leave it alone. Now was not the time to ask them about sleeping in the same room. She hoped that they were being careful. Risk was a relative concept.

“Harry, Dan and Emma love and respect you. Hermione is obviously in love with you. That’s good enough for me. Hermione, I have known you your whole life. You’re the closest I’m ever going to get to having a child of my own. I love you,” Diane told them. She paused for a moment collecting her thoughts.

“That said, I’m very concerned about you. Both of you. I see the crushing stress you are under and I worry about how you’re coping. Harry you said you feel like your life spins out of control. Why do you think you feel that way?”

It was then that Harry realized Diane didn’t know the prophecy. He told her the whole thing. Diane’s eyebrows knitted together as she frowned.

“How reliable is this divination witchcraft?” She asked. To her surprise Harry burst out laughing. Hermione snickered a bit too.

“I’m sorry. I was once told by the smartest witch I know that as a whole, divination is rubbish,” Harry said still smiling.

“Wooly rubbish. Unfortunately this one is a real prophecy. Even if it weren’t, Voldemort is making it real,” Hermione replied.

“So you have to kill him. I guess that makes sense in a cosmic sort of way,” Diane mused. She formed her next question as Hermione tightened the blanket again.

“How have you two been sleeping?” Diane asked.

“Since when?” Harry asked with a snort. The question didn’t seem to sit well with him.

“I don’t know. You tell me,” the therapist answered.

“I have nightmares about the wedding almost every night,” Hermione confessed when it became apparent that Harry was not going to answer.

“The same one every night?” Diane asked.

“No.”

Diane waited and then prompted for details when none were apparently coming.

“Sometimes it is what happened. Sometimes Mum is kissed. Sometimes Dad misses and Lestrangle kills him. Sometimes Harry is killed,” Hermione answered.

Diane thought that it was interesting that it was never Hermione dying. When she asked about it Hermione seemed surprised as if it had never occurred to her.

“You’ve never woken me up,” Harry said with a frown. Hermione shrugged.

“I’ve had bad dreams since I was little. I usually wake up in the middle of them. I’ve only had nightmares once when you were in bed with me. Besides your dreams are worse than mine,” Hermione replied.

“What is worse than seeing the people you love killed?” Diane asked ignoring the fact that Hermione had just confessed to sleeping with Harry.

“Not much,” Harry answered not telling her that he used to see actual murders through Riddle’s eyes. “I’ve had bad dreams off and on since Cedric was killed a few years ago. There’s not much I can do about it.”

“I see. You have developed a pretty bad temper Hermione,” Diane observed. She made it sound like an accusation on purpose to get a desired effect.

“What are you talking about?” Hermione snapped. Diane just looked at her for a moment and then shook her head.

“You just proved my point, sweets. Is this a recent development?” Diane asked.

“Since the wedding,” Harry answered. He looked defiantly at Hermione’s glare.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the young witch said dismissively.

“Uh huh. You snapped at your Mum about the house in Crawly. You nearly took Turpin apart in defense class. Chambers is still afraid of you. Moody wasn’t fazed by you yelling at him but you scared me,” Harry told her. Hermione shrunk into her blanket cocoon as if he were yelling again.

Diane said, “I saw the memory of the duel. I thought you showed remarkable restraint, all things considered. Do you ever relive the battle at the wedding during the day?”

“Once,” Hermione said biting her lip. Harry’s jaw dropped. She swallowed and said, “I didn’t want you to worry.”

"I'm surprised it's only been once. Smell, sight, people and many other things can trigger these things. What do you think triggered it?" Diane asked.

"Mrs. Weasley. She was wearing the same perfume that she had on at the wedding. She hugged me and until I showered that night I kept thinking about it," Hermione answered quietly.

"Did you have a flashback?" Diane inquired. When Hermione nodded she asked, "Of what?"

"The Dementor picking up Mum to suck her soul out. I was trying so hard to get my patronus to form but couldn't," Hermione said miserably.

"Is this why you've been nearly obsessive about learning the charm better?" Harry asked her and she admitted that it was.

"What about you Harry? Have you relived any of the horrors in your life during the day?" Diane asked. When he shook his head she continued, "Do you ever feel numb? Or maybe exaggerate your emotions?"

"What do you mean, exaggerate?" he asked.

"Do you have overstated reactions? Say someone gives you a gift and you start crying?"

"Not like that, but I have been known for my temper," Harry replied.

Diane nodded but didn't speak for a few moments. Finally she shook herself. She was tired too.

"Okay. I could tell you that I think both of you are suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. After everything you've done and been through it is a virtual certainty. I would need to speak to you a lot more and ask more questions, many of which you wouldn't want to answer, to do a proper diagnosis, but I won't. I can tell you are both resisting the idea of formal therapy. Instead, I have a few suggestions for you," Diane told them.

"I want both of you to start keeping a dream journal. This is for your eyes only. You don't have to share it with me or anyone else unless you want to. Sometimes writing out what we dream can help us deal with it. Secondly, I would like both of you to make a list of the top ten worst things that have ever happened to you. Again these are for you. You need to deal with your traumas, but before that, you need to know what they are," she told them. She could tell that neither of them were thrilled with her ideas but she continued on anyway, "I also would like you to breathe."

"Breathe?" Harry asked.

"Yes, Harry, sometimes it is as simple as breathing. When you are anxious, the body's natural reaction is to breathe rapidly and shallowly. I want each of you to take a deep breath about once an hour. Set an alarm on your watch if you have to. I have some books on meditation that might interest you two but let's just work on breathing for now."

"Er, okay," Harry said.

"And don't forget your dream journals or your lists. I suppose I should mention one more thing," Diane said. Hermione looked almost afraid of what was to come but Diane smiled gently. "I won't tell anyone that you are sleeping together. As far as I am concerned this conversation was completely confidential even though technically I am not your therapist."

"Technically?" Hermione asked with a trace of a smile.

"Yes, technically. Now, I believe that the Headmistress wants to see you Harry. Hermione, your mum needs to see you," Diane told them.

Harry, go on. I want to talk with Diane for another minute. She leaned into him and whispered, "I love you."

He smiled, and whispered, "I love you too." Smiling at Diane, he said, "Thanks for stopping."

After Harry closed the door, she asked, "What's up?"

Hermione took a breath and said, "I want to make love with Harry?"

Diane nodded and asked, "For the first time?"

Hermione nodded.

Diane replied, "You're both young and under a lot of stress, but he's a good man. You only give your innocence away once. Are you sure?"

Hermione nodded and said, "I lost my innocence when I watched an eleven year old climb onto a troll and fight it to save my life. We learned to live with our decisions when Harry chose to spare the life of a man and later watched that man kill one of our friends right in front of Harry. I've had my body ripped open when I was sixteen by a man who was intent of causing me an agonizing death. All I want right now is to feel Harry inside of me. Is that so wrong?"

Diane looked at her Goddaughter for a moment, wrapped her arms around her and said, "No. It's OK. You'll know when you're ready. Trust your heart. I love you."

"Thanks Diane. I love you too."

As she walked back to her room Diane wondered what she would do given the same circumstances. On one hand they were trying to lead a militia in a terrorist war, on the other they were trying to cope with being eighteen and in love. They probably both wished they had time for roses, love letters and champagne. Diane sadly realized that probably wasn't their fate. They were left with a stolen moment here and there and even that was criticized by Harry's mentor.

Harry found McGonagall in her office. They didn't say much, but sat together looking out the window to the lake. The elves kept giving Harry fresh butterbeers.

Hermione found her parents where Diane had left them hours before. Emma was asleep in Dan's arms. Dan was nodding off. Hermione

slipped next to him and cuddled close to her father. He kissed her forehead and then dozed off.

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4:00 PM

The portkeys sent to the families of the students that had been hurt were timed in ten-minute intervals. Harry and Hermione met them at Hogsmeade station and they took the carriages back and forth to the castle.

Minerva and Emma had greeted the first two arrivals and led them to the hospital wing. Dean's mother and Katlyn's parent were muggles. Minerva was glad that Emma was with her.

Dean was about to be released. Poppy was checking him over one last time along with giving him a lecture about being careful.

Diane was talking to Katlyn who was able to breathe but was completely exhausted. She wasn't so tired that she didn't snicker at Dean. It wasn't as funny when Madame Pomfrey turned her wrath on Katlyn.

Diane advised Poppy to get some sleep and again was treated to getting snapped at again. The Master Healer hadn't slept much in the last week either.

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7:00 PM

Dinner was being served later than usual. All of the parents were still in the castle and were scattered around the room sitting with their children. Even the Grangers were sitting at the Gryffindor table instead of their normal spots at the head table.

Minerva was worried about Hermione and Harry. She had asked them to be as visible as possible but was now worried that it was a bad idea. They needed to be visible but also positive.

Harry was almost mute. Hermione had bitten her bottom lip so many times that it was swollen.

Headmistress Minerva McGonagall stood as the last students took their seats. Silence fell and she looked out over the room.

“Last night will forever be imprinted on our lives. I have to say I am extremely proud to know each and everyone of you. Last night we suffered no losses. However in the past few years our losses have been many. I ask that tonight we remember the students that have died in this war. Their sacrifice has allowed us to fight on another day. Mr. Potter?”

Harry stood up and cleared his throat. He picked up his goblet and raised it to the head table where Amos Diggory was sitting with Justin’s dad.

“To Cedric Diggory, a fine champion and an even better man,” Harry said. He remained standing.

Hermione stood up and held her goblet.

“To Ron and Ginny, two of the best friends I will ever have.”

Padma stood. “To my sister Parvetti, you’ll always be the pretty one, Parv.”

Susan got out of her seat. “To Hannah and Justin. May we all remember to question everything.”

It went on for quite a while. With each name Harry felt his stomach tighten more. Emma slipped her hand into his when she realized how upset he was getting.

After no more names were spoken McGonagall nodded to the students who were standing. They sat down almost in the order that they had stood.

“We shall never forget,” she declared.

The meal was a quiet one but not as somber as Diane expected. She listened as several of the Gryffindor girls got the giggles. She watched as three Ravenclaw boys joshed each other while watching Hermione, who was completely oblivious. She saw five of the Hufflepuff's throwing green beans at each other when they thought no one was looking.

After all that had happened they were still kids.

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Nov 2

The news article from the Daily Prophet the next morning was different than what Minerva would have written.

Ministry, Headmistress endanger school children and citizens of Hogsmeade

By Cheryl Whiteheart

It has been learned that MLE John Thomas and Minister of Magic Abraxan knew that an attack by an unknown force was eminent. Firecall records indicate that Headmistress McGonagall knew that the castle was going to be attacked for almost a week yet did nothing to evacuate the students. Records further indicate that some students participated in the destruction of school property including damage to shrubs, exotic trees and the destruction of one of the school greenhouses.

Our investigation has uncovered proof that a student was allowed to go off school property directly resulting in that student's death. Justin Finch-Fletchley 17 was reported dead on October 22. At the time he had been off the school grounds on an approved school project. This is an obvious case of poor judgment on McGonagall's part.

There is also direct evidence that arson was deliberately committed on October 31. This reporter calls on the Board of School Governors

to investigate McGonagall's reckless endangerment of our children and willful destruction of school property.

It showed a photo of Harry and the others finishing the battle.

Taking a leaf out of Dr. Turnbull's book, McGonagall took a steadying breath, and then burned the paper up in a flash. Fortunately The Quibbler had a different viewpoint.

Tom Riddle AKA He-who-must-not-be-sane gets his ass kicked

Friday evening at dusk a group of students and teachers marshaled by Harry Potter annihilated an attacking force consisting of Inferi and an estimated 50 Death Eaters led by Voldemort.

Using a combination of muggle technology and some fireworks donated by Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes, 93 Diagon Alley, Mr. Potter and his forces decimated the attacking force. Within a single minute an estimated 75 percent of the attackers had been incapacitated.

For several minutes the battle raged fiercely. During that time 30 students had been injured by the Inferi's attack. They were treated and eventually the majority of them spent the night in their own beds. Only three remained in the hospital wing over night. They are all expected to recover completely.

It appears that the hyphenated one had found one of the legendary cursed divisions from Roman times and reanimated them. Witnesses described them as an ancient Roman army consisting of gladiator style footsoldiers, bowmen and a support team. They wore Roman armor, helmets and something resembling a short kilt.

Besides Mr. Potter two of the real heroes of the evening were Mr. Neville Longbottom and Mr. Remus Lupin who repelled an attack by several of the attackers who had managed to scale the wall with a ladder. Mr. Longbottom was slightly injured during the attack, but was treated on the spot with the exceptional care provided by Master Healer Poppy Pomfrey.

By daybreak the battle was all but over. Under the direct observation of Minister of Magic Natasha Abraxan and Magical Law Enforcement Director John Thomas, the remaining Inferi handed over their weapons to Potter and the defenders. Minutes after the surrender, the ancient Roman army turned into rust and dust. 45 Death Eaters who apparently hadn't been taking notes in second year when Flame Freezing charms had been discussed were killed in the fire that had been set to incapacitate the inferi.

Minister Abraxan specifically praised Hogwarts Headmistress Minerva McGonagall for her quick thinking and improvisation in defending the castle and protecting our children under extraordinary circumstances. She was quoted saying, "Professor McGonagall had previously promised the safety of our children and last evening she delivered. In addition to keeping them safe, she has been orchestrating the efforts all term to provide them with a meaningful education in these times of unprecedented stress."

Head Girl Hermione Granger concurred saying, "I saw students apply skills this evening that Professors McGonagall, Vector and Flitwick taught us. With their help and the help from the Ministry Auror Cadets, the castle and the occupants were in good hands."

A complete list of the Death Eaters who were killed can be found on pages 10 and 11.

A list of Death Eaters believed to be still at large can be found on page 15 column E.

Several photos were printed showing the eerily still battlefield and a photo of Madam Pomfrey and Molly Weasley standing next to a row of unoccupied hospital beds.

There were several other articles in the thicker than normal edition. Minerva turned her attention to them.

Artifacts found at Hogwarts

Hogwarts Librarian and Historian Irma Pince reported finding several previously believed lost artifacts that appear to have once belonged

to the school founders. She said, “I found a drinking cup that almost certainly belonged to founder Helga Hufflepuff, a ring that was documented as belonging to Salazar Slytherin and the legendary Slytherin Locket.” She said, “It was unfortunate that they were all broken. Otherwise they would have been virtually priceless.” There was a photo of the objects on a table.

Prankster pulls stunt at Hogwarts

Hogwarts Keeper of the Keys and Care of Magical Creatures Instructor Rubeus Hagrid reported finding a dead snake on the Hogwarts grounds this morning. He said, “It looked a bit like an American Diamondback that some kids did a bit o charm work on make it a bit bigger. It was kinda hard to tell, being as it got burned in da fire that was on the front lawn.”

Filius put down the paper and said, “Fifty points to you Miss Lovegood.”

Sitting at the table next to him Minerva shook her head and said, “Make it a hundred.”

There had been no mention of the putter in the paper. Harry made it absolutely clear that no one was ever to mention the putter. He wanted Riddle to assume that it was still safely hidden. In truth it was safely hidden – in pieces placed on a table down in the chamber of secrets.

... --- ...

Hundreds of miles away in Nottingham, Riddle put the paper down and said “Lucius, go get Fenrir Greyback.” If he couldn’t get to Potter personally, he would see to it that the people around him got hurt. He had carefully read and reread the paper. It was obvious that the writer of the articles knew nothing about the Horcruxes.

... --- ...

Moody took the seat that had been offered to him inside the private office. It was decorated tastefully with thick champagne colored

carpet and walls covered with objects reflecting her background as a high priestess. Seated next to him was Director John Thomas who was dressed in a plain work robe similar to what the Hogwarts students would wear. As was his habit Moody checked the room for listening charms, found none and acquired a miniscule comfort level. He was certain that he'd been summoned to meet with the two to provide an assessment of the Hogwarts battle.

After five minutes of chitchat he gave it. "Potter orchestrated a flawless defense of the castle. He spent his own gold to buy those tanker trucks and all of the," he paused for a moment to find the word, "Kerosene and flamed their asses. The two surprises from my point of view were the size of the inferi army and the number of Death Eaters that were there."

Abraxan nodded for him to continue.

"Harry's got a think tank of brainpower backing him up, but most of the ideas are his or Granger's to begin with."

"Was there any trouble with the Horcruxes?"

"I didn't see how they did it. I saw the box full of the broken pieces, probably the same as you did. Granger must have figured out a way to remove the soul fragments without getting herself killed. I saw her yesterday afternoon distracting Potter," he snipped in disgust.

Abraxan glanced at Thomas who said, "Perhaps it would be best to give them a bit more space, Moody. Sunset missed two days of work the last time that you sent him out on one of their dates. It was all I could do to keep Chambers from resigning from the Cadet program. They must have scared the hell out of him."

Moody wouldn't yield, replying, "He needs to stay focused. This is a critical time."

Abraxan wanted to move on and said, "You're both right gentlemen. Potter needs a bit of space, and when he's out, he needs to be sensible. I'll do you both a favor and talk with him myself. What about awards?"

Moody said, "It's a long list. Everyone in the defense club that he runs for the students, all of the Grangers, Lupin, the Weasley brothers, the Lovegoods..."

"And everyone in the Order?"

"I suppose," he replied grudgingly.

John Thomas shook his head, and sputtered, "Merlin Moody, it's not like it's coming out of your pension. Minister, if we're done here, I'll take Alastor out for lunch."

Moody cracked a smile at the thought of a free meal, then thought for a moment. "We need to go after Snape next."

Abraxan who had been finishing her notes looked up and said, "Go on."

Moody said, "He's the only one of that bunch who could be out recruiting."

Abraxan looked at him for a moment and realized that this was his way of asking for help outside of the Order. She replied, "What do you need?"

"He's probably recruiting from Eastern Europe, possibly Bucharest or Kosovo. He needs to be eliminated. We don't have many people that he wouldn't know."

"Who's he recruiting?"

"We found forty men and six women dead at Hogwarts. The only two we have identified are Travers and Umbridge. Most looked between 20 and 40, but it was hard to tell. Quite a few were burned up pretty badly. Their deaths most likely left Voldemort with Snape, Malfoy, his brat and Dolohov."

"Is he having much luck?" asked Thomas.

“Fortunately we didn’t have to find out. Based on where we found them, it appears that most of them were dead within 30 seconds of the fire starting. We never had the chance to trade shots with them.”

“Don’t sound so disappointed, Moody,” said Thomas. “The death toll could have been a lot different if they’d blasted the front door open and a few hundred of the Romans had made their way into the castle.”

Abraxan finished the conversation saying, “Good planning, good execution and a bit of luck are an outstanding combination. Let’s be happy that it worked out. I’ll see if I can work something out regarding the potions master. Enjoy your lunch Gentlemen.”

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November 7

Abraxan agreed after some discussion that the awarding of the medals would need to wait. A published list of recipients would give Voldemort something to aim for. As it was several families of the defenders at the Battle of Hogwarts had been attacked.

Hermione Granger had escorted Wendy Williams to the funeral of her only brother. First year Clancy Clearwater had laid his sister Penelope to rest in a freezing rain with Harry Potter and Cadet Alyx at his side. Dean Thomas came back from the funeral of his father in a rage. The whole school was surprised when the only person who was able to comfort Lisa Turpin when her parents were murdered was Hermione.

... --- ...

Minerva gave a stern look. “Mr. Crow you are going to allow us a break, aren’t you?”

“Yes ma’am. I’m to remind everyone to complete a proper review when they’re finished.”

“Very good. Seeing as you have another 22 feet of parchment, you’d best continue.

... --- ...

November 8

Hermione had walked into the library on a mission and ended up in the middle of a fight.

A group of Ravenclaws had said something nasty to a group of Slytherins. The Slytherins had retaliated by attempting to hex them. They had missed and hit a bookshelf. The books had flown into the group studying potions with Hermione. Hermione scowled at the copy of Quidditch Through the Ages that had nailed her in the face.

Katlyn immediately drew her wand but Hermione took it from her. Wendy held it as Hermione stood back and started using full body binds at the third years that were rolling around on the floor. One of them threw a book at her, swearing. She ducked and then shouted, “Stupefy” at the top of her lungs. The kid hit the floor with a thump and the two students still able to move froze mid punch.

Madame Pence had come running when the shouting started. She looked at Hermione and then at the pile of younger kids.

“Fifty points from Ravenclaw for being absolutely stupid. Throwing insults and making assumptions about others because of their bloodlines is what caused this damn war. All of you are going to follow me to the Headmistress’ office. Right now.” None of them could recall seeing the old Liberian so made before.

Hermione felt her eye swelling and knew that it was going to be black.

“What about them? They tried to hex us?” one of the Ravenclaw boys objected.

“Yes, they did. Do you see what hurtful words can lead to?” Hermione demanded. She looked at the Slytherins and gave them a glare.

“Twenty points for not ignoring the taunts. Twenty points for starting a fight,” Hermione told them.

The tension in the castle had been ebbing and flowing since the battle. A lot of the kids were taking their frustration out on the Slytherins.

“She should have given them points for acting like Gryffindors,” Wendy said as they passed. The Slytherins looked disgusted at the thought.

“Ten points from Gryffindor for encouraging it,” Hermione snapped at her.

To say Professor McGonagall was unhappy was an understatement. She yelled at all six of the third years for a good fifteen minutes. Then she gave them each detention for a week. She also insisted that they spend time with Dr. Diane.

Hermione felt bad for her Godmother.

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November 13

Though not exactly happy about it, Snape was back recruiting in Romania. He stopped several times in Bucharest, as it had a fairly large wizarding population. He had made arrangements to meet a witch and three wizards at midnight at the Armadillo club.

Snape was still in pain from the burns that he'd received. His hands would be scarred for a long time, and somehow his hair had been singed and had briefly caught on fire causing burns to his scalp. As such he walked with quite a still gait as he made his downstairs to the underground strip club.

Handing the doorman 50 lei, he entered the bar and saw the usual two dancers demonstrating how limber young females could be when aided by a pole. Not giving the entertainers a second glance, he ordered a drink at the bar and glanced at the four seated at a table.

The witch appeared to be in her mid thirties and bore a passing resemblance to Bella – dark hair, thin and dark eyes. The wizards looked like they had seen some action. They had keen eyes and didn't look nervous.

The witch stood up and the wizards followed in kind. The music was loud, too loud to hold a meaningful discussion at their table. She made her way over to the back rooms where the entertainers plied their other trade. One of the wizards glanced at Snape and he got up and followed them.

Snape closed door to the little room behind him. He was surprised to see that the witch was already half undressed. He was even more surprised to hear "Petrificus Totalus." The wizard pushed Snape over and he fell onto the bed, his head resting on the witch's lap.

"OK, Now we talk," said one of the wizards. "You got job for us?"

"Yes," replied Snape. He could only move his eyes and mouth. At the moment, his eyes were fixed on the some of the witch's finer assets.

"How much you pay us?"

"A thousand galleons a month." The wizard gave him a hard look and Snape concluded, "Each."

"You have place for us to stay or we live in hotel?"

"One of the other Death Eaters has a rather large estate in Nottingham. You may stay there if you wish."

"So why'd you kill him, Professor?" The thick Romanian accent completely disappeared and was replaced by a bouncy cockney sound. The witch slid Snape's head out from on top of her lap and said, "You might as well take another look. They're the last that you'll ever see." She turned around and got dressed. She stunned Snape, took out the anti-apparation manacles from under the bed and placed them on Snape's wrists. She took the bag of gold out of his robe pocket and said, "Perhaps you three should keep this as evidence." She also found two wands on him and placed them in a leg holster

that she'd been wearing. She stunned him a second time, turned to the three wizards and said, "Thank you Inspectors. If the British Ministry can return the favor, please let us know. Holding onto the greasy Death Eater, she took the portkey out of her robes, activated it and disappeared.

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Things would never be the same for Harry at Hogwarts again. In truth he had saved the school several times, first year and second year and arguably over the summer, but this time was different. This time there had been hundreds of witnesses, and the teachers weren't trying to cover anything up.

The mountain of fan mail that arrived in the two weeks following the battle was astonishing and the large pile from the parents of students and from the students themselves was harder to ignore. Emma, Dan and Moody took it on themselves to sort through the various piles – Underwear/photos from adult witches, underwear/photos from students, letters from parents, those with gifts, business offers, letters from officials, letters from students and ordinary fan mail. Moody checked each item for hexes or porkey charms before letting the Grangers near anything.

Hermione was highly amused until she saw the knickers from the students. Harry comforted her with a few words and a snog that made her hair curl more.

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November 15

Hermione was sitting at a large oak table in library when she closed her eyes and rested her forehead on the table. She was too tired to walk back to the suite she shared with Harry. She wished softly out loud for a soft pillow. She heard a soft pop.

"Thank you," she said automatically. The house elf vanished again before she could open her eyes.

The dream journals that she and Harry had started seemed to be making her nightmares worse instead of better. She had discussed it with Diane and found that it was a pretty normal reaction. According to Diane, Hermione needed to learn to accept what was bothering her before the nightmares would diminish.

It was nine o'clock in the evening. She had an hour before the research team was to meet. Her work was done. She had her bullet points noted. She had assigned her rounds of the castle to a couple of prefects who looked as exhausted as Hermione felt. Apparently she and Harry were not the only ones having nightmares.

At Poppy's request Dr. Diane had remained in the castle for the remainder of the term. Her professional talents were being put to the test. In addition to the regular groups she had been meeting with, she was also counseling on a one on one basis.

Hermione had spoken to her several times privately as had Harry. But it was one step forward and two steps back. Diane had suggested that they get away for a weekend. Instead of going to number twelve the teens were going to hide in Edinburgh for a night.

Before they could leave, Hermione was holding a meeting. Her group had been tasked with one more thing - Find a way to kill Tom Riddle.

This thought was on Hermione's mind as she drifted into a light sleep. About fifteen minutes later the wards she had set up in the hall warned her that someone was approaching. She connected the tip of her wand to the small wooden box in front of her.

Then she smiled.

Three people were approaching the room. One was a werewolf, one was a female witch and one was a female muggle. Thirty seconds later she was hugging her mum tightly.

"You look tired," Emma commented after the usual greetings.

"I am. I think we all are," Hermione amended. "What are you doing here, Mum? I thought you and Dad were out tonight." Auror Sunset had agreed to escort her parents to the play that Harry had purchased ticket for.

"Bob had to cancel. I also have some information for you," Emma explained. "And I couldn't pass up the chance to see my kids before they leave." In a lower voice she said, "Be careful. I love you both."

Hermione smiled at her mum as they sat down. Tonks and Remus stayed for few minutes then left for their own meeting.

An ancient house elf named Joanie was delighted to bring the Granger women some biscuits and a pot of coffee. Emma was surprised at the difference in Joanie and the two elves at Harry's house. Dobby and Winky were always squealing and eager to please. Joanie seemed afraid of them.

Hermione again remembered her manners and thanked Joanie who popped away quickly. Seeing her mothers questioning look she quickly explained. "She was bonded to the Nott family. Theodore used to use her for a target while practicing the Cruciatus Curse."

"And the wizarding world mocked you for wanting to free the elves?" Emma asked aghast.

"Yes. Not all elves are treated like that though. I'm sure Madame Bones never abused her elves..." Hermione trailed off not really wanting to discuss her S.P.E.W ideals.

"Is something wrong, Hermione?" Emma asked as her mother instincts kicked in. Her daughter nodded as she slowly chewed on a chocolate biscuit.

"Can you stay after the meeting? I have something I want to talk about."

"Of course."

Emma wondered what was on her daughter's mind but put it aside for now. Hermione recognized the fine leather briefcase that Emma placed on the table as the one that she had purchased for her mother's birthday. Hermione had been saving for two years to get Emma a mother's ring. After the Death Eater attack Hermione had gotten a little more practical. The briefcase was an exact duplicate of the one Dan had purchased soon after they had opened their practice.

What she didn't know was that Emma had cried for fifteen minutes upon receiving it.

Hermione pushed the thoughts of their burnt up house out of her mind. Emma handed her a copy of the London Times. On the front page was news of a terrorist attack.

As she read the article she almost vomited. A bus full of school children, on their way to an overnight field trip, had been attacked. The terrorists had not used bombs. Instead it was a vicious knife attack. As she read on she realized why her mother had given her the article.

"... one child was heard to be screaming 'monsters! They were monsters' as he was lead away by EMT's ... Not much is known about the perpetrators of this attack ... One EMT said he had never seen knife wounds quite like it ... Their bodies were torn apart ... Of the twenty children on board only three survived ..."

Hermione cleared her throat after taking in the horror. Emma placed her hand on Hermione's arm.

"That was last night," Emma commented.

"Full moon." Hermione began to shake slightly before reigning in her emotions. She picked up her quill and made a note on her agenda for the meeting. "Does Harry know?" Hermione asked.

Emma nodded. "Remus and Tonks just went to tell him."

Hermione knew that Harry was meeting with the fighting team in the Room of Requirement. She wrote a short message to Harry and

called for Joanie again. A few minutes later she had a response from Harry. She could tell from his handwriting he was as shaken as she was.

They didn't discuss it as members of the research team began to file in. Susan was first. She hugged Emma as tightly as Hermione had. Soon Luna and Padma had made their way down from Ravenclaw tower. Molly, Arabella, Diggle and Tom came together having just finished a drink at the Leaky Cauldron. Professors Sprout and Flitwick arrived a few minutes later.

When Fred and George Weasley entered the library Padma stood up to hug them both. Hermione had no idea how Padma was functioning after losing her sister. While they had never given the impression of being two halves of the same person the way that the Weasley's did, Hermione knew that Parveti and Padma had shared a very special bond.

Fred and George each kissed their mum who smiled at her boys.

"What are you two doing here? You're in the other group." Padma asked as the Weasley boys took seats on each side of her.

"Well Miss Patil," George began.

"Harry told us that Hermione..." Fred chimed in.

"Wanted us to join your group..."

"For tonight. And since we have always..."

"Been much more afraid of Hermione than Harry..."

"Since all he has going for him is that..."

"Boy-who-lived thing and Ron always said..."

"That Hermione was frightening..."

"And brilliant. Scary combination that."

"We didn't think it was an offer..."

"We could refuse."

Padma looked as if she were at Wimbledon. Hermione smiled a crooked smile at their mention of Ron. George met her eyes with his. He grinned.

"Besides we've never actually been in the library before," George admitted. Sprout and Flitwick both laughed and Molly shook her head. She had no trouble at all believing that.

"I'm not surprised," Hermione said dryly. "Believe it or not boys we need your brains tonight."

"Ah, Hermione, my dearest. Please remember that I am the brain of this pair. My dear brother George is the good looking one," Fred told her. George smoothed his hair and primped a bit.

"I thought you were the good looking one Forge. I do remember you trying to convince me that you were the best looking of your brothers," Hermione said thinking back to a different but not better time and place.

"I was trying to calm you down, woman. You were hysterical and not in the fun way either. Honestly, I would have said anything to stop you from hexing me," Fred told her. She smiled at his imitation of her use of the word.

"Me, hex you? On the train? You must be thinking of someone else," She said in what she hoped was a sweet and innocent voice. She had been frantic that Harry and Ron had gone missing and not been on the train.

"Hermione tried to hex you on the train?" George asked. "When? Where was I?"

"My second year. You had just stolen Ginny's diary and she was chasing you through the train," Hermione said.

The three of them thought about that for a moment. Then George snickered.

"I was going to read it out loud to everyone. When I opened it the pages were blank. Little Colin jumped on my back and tried to take me down," George said amused.

"I remember that. Ginny hexed you. It was disgusting," Padma said scrunching her nose.

"Yes, it was. My sister had the horrible habit of using that bat bogey hex on her brothers. Mum even encouraged her. I think the only one of us she never got was Ron."

"She needed no encouragement from me," Molly scolded in a light voice.

"Bat bogey hex?" Emma asked.

"Oh it's horrible. Ginny got Malfoy with it once. I think she did something special just for him. He had nine bogies attacking him," Luna said.

"One day you will have to share that memory with us," Hermione told her.

"That's right. You and Harry had already taken Umbridge to the Centaurs by then," Luna said. She hummed a bit. Hermione sighed softly.

"I never did give you house points for that did I, Hermione?" Flitwick asked with a wicked smile that Hermione had never seen before.

"Professor McGonagall gave me plenty of points and we didn't take her to the Centaurs. I was just trying to figure out how to get away from her."

"I'm surprised she ran into the forest when the fire started," Flitwick was heard to mutter.

Madame Pomfrey had entered the room while the discussion was happening. She was smiling sadly. She remembered healing George when he had arrived at school that year as she had Ginny and Harry after the Chamber of Secrets incident. She never would forget the look on Malfoy's face when she had not been able to stop his bogies from attacking. The residual effects of that curse had lasted days. Poppy wouldn't be surprised if occasionally his nose would start to act up again even now.

She was glad to see that the group was able to talk about their friends who had passed with such affection and few tears. Molly did look a bit better than she had the last time Poppy had seen her. Diane must be very good at her job, Poppy mused.

"Originally we had one thing to discuss tonight. It would have kept us busy for a couple hours. Unfortunately recent events have changed that," Hermione began, getting down to business. She didn't want to think about the fire or the centaurs or Umbridge.

"The muggle press is reporting that there was a terrorist attack last night on a bus of school kids. It has the markings of a werewolf attack. I would assume that Greyback and his pack were behind it but we have no information on that. Fred, George, I wanted you here tonight so that we could talk about weapons development against werewolves."

Everyone digested that for a moment.

"The easiest way to kill a werewolf is silver. Even touching their skin with a minor amount will hurt them badly," Poppy said.

"How much would it take to kill them?" Susan asked falling into her roll of questioner.

"It depends. Have they transformed or are they in a human form? How big are they? Are they muggle or magical?" Poppy asked.

"How does silver kill them?" Emma asked.

"It attacks the lycanthropy and causes it to coagulate," Poppy answered. Seeing the questioning look on several faces she simplified her answer. "It causes the lycanthropy cells to clot and blocks the flow of their blood."

"Break down the differences," Hermione said grabbing a quill.

They listened to Poppy expound on the differences. In the end the conclusion was that it was easier to kill a magical werewolf than a muggle one simply because their magic caused their blood to clot faster. Transformed werewolves were harder to kill because their skin became harder to penetrate.

"Their size has little to do with it when transformed. However the smaller they are while in human form the harder they are to kill. Surprisingly it takes a lot more silver and they are much stronger than their larger counterpart," Poppy concluded.

"Maybe that's why Greyback attacks children," Padma commented.

"Good point. They might also be easier to manipulate into following him," Hermione said. "Merlin, I hope not. I don't know if killing children is something that we can live with, even if they are werewolves."

"It's only one possibility. Someone needs to question those kids who survived. How old were they?" Molly asked.

"Eleven and twelve," Emma said in a tight voice, "There was nothing in the wizarding press or on the wireless about this. I don't think that the ministry knows. What happens to muggles that are bitten?"

"They are told the truth about their injuries and the wizarding world. Many commit suicide," Diggle answered her.

Silence followed.

"Everyone knows what a dung bomb is. What if instead of dung it spread something else," Fred finally said.

"If we made one that spread silver pieces that could penetrate the skin," George said thinking out loud.

"You'd have a muggle bomb," Hermione told them.

"It doesn't have to penetrate the skin. Just touch it," Flitwick pointed out.

"Dust," Hermione said simply.

Fred shook his head and said, "It also has to stop them and have enough mass and velocity to knock them down in their wolf form. We'd better go with the bigger pieces. Should this be effective against one werewolf or several at once?"

Emma looked at her daughter in horror and asked, "A biological weapon?"

"I can't believe I suggested it..." Hermione began. She took a deep breath and then described muggle biological weapons.

"If it got into their lungs would it cause Pulmonary emboli?" Emma asked. Most of the people look at her like she had grown a second head.

"Yes," Poppy answered.

She and the others watched Hermione tap the quill in her hand on her jaw as she thought. A few seconds she was chewing on her lower lip. Everyone at the table recognized the behavior.

"Mum do you have your pepper spray with you?" Hermione asked.

"Never leave home without it," she replied searching her briefcase. She quickly found her keys.

"Be very careful with this. It causes pain and suffering if you get it in your face. Think you can make something like this filled with silver dust?" Hermione asked handing the bottle to George.

Emma explained how it worked. Padma looked nervous as the twins leaned in front of her to examine the canister.

"If we created a silver dust bomb by the time they figured out what had happened it would be too late for them."

"This information can never leave the Order," Hermione said suddenly. When she got confused looks she continued, "Can you imagine what people like Fudge or Umbridge would have done with this information?"

"Also if we are going to use a weapon like this we would have to make sure Remus and probably Bill are far away," Pomona pointed out.

"I think..." George said. He stopped.

"Yes, George I think we could. Set a timed..."

"Yes. Five minutes after touching air... So you need two devices. One to put down a werewolf that's attacking and another to kill a group of them that are stationary."

"You two work it out and let me know what you come up with. We have another issue for tonight. Is Alyx upstairs? Can you guys ask her to come down?" Hermione asked them.

The twins each kissed Molly and Padma before they left. Fred kissed Hermione on the cheek too. George looked at him strangely.

"Hermione, anytime you want a job just come see me. You have so much wasted potential," he said with a wink at Emma.

"Is that something you would know about?" Hermione asked and he laughed.

"Yes, I would," He told them in a proud voice.

They took a break as they waited for Alyx to arrive. Hermione stretched a bit. The coffee had helped.

"You're wasting your potential are you?" Emma asked in a teasing voice. Hermione gave her mum a weak smile.

"Apparently so. I guess I'll have to think up a prank or two," Hermione told her.

"Merlin. Can you imagine the chaos the twins would have had caused if they had Hermione's brain backing them up?" Sprout asked Flitwick. They both shivered at that thought.

"Thank Merlin, that there wasn't much chance of that happening. Hermione disapproved of their pranks as much as I did," Molly said. She seemed lost in thought for a moment then she smiled and said, "They were always on Percy, trying to get him to help them concoct some thing or another."

"I didn't disapprove as much as I just hoped I wasn't the one they were going to prank next. Percy was the one who thought that they were going to be the end of Gryffindor tower with their pranks," Hermione said with a fond smile. Molly chuckled and then her smile widened even more.

"Did Percy tell you that the night he proposed to you?" Molly asked. Hermione groaned.

"How in the world do you know about that?" Hermione asked feeling her face turn red.

"Proposed?" Emma asked in an amused voice.

Molly took great joy in telling the story. Hermione was embarrassed but encouraged Molly just the same.

"Oh what summer was it? Before your third year. Yes, we were at the Leaky Cauldron. Harry had blown up that awful Marge woman and we had just gotten back from Egypt," Molly began. "I had gotten up to check on the twins. Percy was on his knees going on and on about how wonderful Hermione was. When he proposed I almost fainted."

“Me too,” Hermione told her. Molly smiled but only a little sadly.

“Then I realized that he had called her Penny. Poor Percy. The twins had slipped him some fire whisky and he was as pissed as he could get and still be conscious.”

“They charmed it to have no taste or smell,” Hermione said.

“I always knew that they were smarter than they let on,” Flitwick said in amusement.

“It was the middle of the night. What were you doing up?” Molly asked. She had always wanted to know.

“Looking for Crookshanks.”

Alyx saved Hermione from more embarrassing questions by arriving. She handed Hermione the pensive and gave Emma a hug. “Hi, Auntie Em,” she said with a smirk. Alyx found a seat between Susan and Padma and they all turned serious again.

“What we are going to look at tonight is going to be hard. It’s also going to be frightening. Anyone who wants to leave can. I won’t blame you,” Hermione said.

“What are we going to see?” Diggle asked.

“Two of Harry’s memories. The one of what happened right after he and Cedric took the tri wizarding cup, and the duel between Voldemort and Professor Dumbledore in the Department of Mysteries.”

No one left the room.

“Harry is sharing these with the hope that we can figure out a way to defeat Voldemort. We need to look at his fighting style. I can stop it or back up the memory at anytime. Is everyone ready?”

Hermione noted that everyone had something to write on. She started the first memory. It played above the pensive like a three dimensional movie.

They watched Cedric and Harry argue about who was to win. They watched as they held their wands at the ready.

“Kill the spare.” They watched Cedric fall.

Pettigrew tying up Harry... The ritual... Blood of an enemy... Flesh of a servant... Bone of the father...

Voldemort rising out of the cauldron. Molly and Diggle both left the room.

Calling the Death Eaters... Harry throwing off Voldemort's Imperius curse... The duel... The Priori Incantatem effect... The golden dome... The apparitions of Cedric through Lily helping Harry.

“Accio Cup,” Harry yelled in the final escape holding onto Cedric's body.

The memory stopped. Hermione looked at her parchment. For nearly a minute there was stunned silence.

“He started early,” Arabella told them.

“Yes. He also led with an unforgivable. One that can't be blocked,” Alyx said. Hermione encouraged them to continue so Alyx spoke on. “He also stacked the odds with the Death Eaters. Even if Harry could have gotten away from Voldemort the Death Eaters would have still been an issue. I think we have taken care of that problem.”

“Let's watch the other memory,” Poppy said feeling sick and dirty. She remembered giving the Diggory's the body of their only son vividly. Hermione started the second memory.

Harry was facing Bellatrix at the Ministry of Magic.

“Well you’re going to have to kill me because it’s gone!” Harry roared. They argued about the prophecy. Bellatrix attempted to summon it... Her begging to not be punished.

“He can’t hear you from here!”

“Can’t I Potter?”

Harry caught unaware.

“Avada Kedavra!” The statue moving in the way and protecting Harry.

Dumbledore animating the statue to fight with him... The desk bursting into flames.

“Indeed, your failure to understand that there are much worse things than death has always been your greatest weakness Tom.”

The whip turning into a serpent... Fawkes catching the killing curse... Dumbledore banishing the serpent... Voldemort vanishing and Bellatrix screaming for him.

“Stay where you are Harry,” Dumbledore bellowed.

The memory seemed a bit fuzzy then. Then Harry spoke with Voldemort’s voice.

“Kill me now Dumbledore...”

They could hear Harry’s voice begging Dumbledore to kill him too.

“And I’ll see Sirius again...”

Moments later Voldemort was gone. Hermione let the memory play so everyone could see Fudge in his pajamas. It didn’t lessen the effect of the seeing the duel.

“Why did the possession stop? Why did he leave Harry’s body?” Poppy asked.

“Love,” Luna said simply.

“Love?” Tom asked.

“Umm... Harry loved Sirius. He must have felt hope that he would see Sirius again if Dumbledore killed him. He thought of his love for him,” Luna concluded.

“She’s right. That was the same thing Dumbledore told Harry,” Hermione said.

“Would that hurt Voldemort?” Emma asked.

“I believe it would. It would only work when someone is possessed. There’s no charm to spell someone with love,” Sprout said.

Again Hermione tapped her quill on her jawbone and chewed on her lip. After about a minute she began to scribble madly on her parchment. The others waited patiently. Finally she looked up.

“Sorry. I had to get that down before I forgot it. What did we see in this duel?”

Alyx replied, “Again he lead with an unblockable unforgivable. This time it was the killing curse. In both memories the killing curse was blocked with a solid object. When fighting him we will need something to be behind.”

“Has anyone ever conducted tests to see what materials block the killing curse?” Hermione asked.

“I don’t believe so. Unless it was the Department of Mysteries, if so we will never see those tests,” Flitwick responded.

“Contact the ministry and be discrete. Harry can talk to the Minister herself if needed but let’s not go there yet. What else?” Hermione asked.

“He wasn’t surrounded by Death Eaters this time. Just Lestrangle and she was useless. He left when he knew he couldn’t win. I think we

should take a play from his book,” Alyx began. She stopped when she realized everyone was staring at her.

“Keep going,” Hermione encouraged.

“At this point he is just another wizard. A really powerful, horribly evil killer, but he’s mortal. We need to surround him, take away his escape, weaken him and then kill him,” Alyx concluded.

“That’s what I was thinking too,” Hermione said nodding.

“Taking away his escape is fairly simple. Anti-apparition wards are common. There are enough of us to surround him. If we had barriers it would lessen the danger to all of us,” Flitwick said.

“We were learning in transfigurations how to create barriers. How would we weaken him?” Susan asked.

“Let’s leave it at that for tonight. It’s getting late. We’ll meet again soon. I want everyone to try to come up with three ways to weaken Voldemort. I think we need a better option than the cruciatus curse,” Hermione told them.

... --- ...

An hour later Harry shut the door and locked it. He threw a couple privacy charms on it and then followed Hermione into the hotel suite. She sat down on the bed and he took a seat in an armless high back chair.

“You okay?” Harry asked her. They had escorted her parents back to their rooms after the meeting. Hermione had taken the time to have a short private conversation with Emma before they left.

“I gave mum my dream journal. I’m worried about how she is going to take it,” Hermione replied.

“Why’d you give it to her?” Harry asked. Hermione kicked off her shoes and stood up.

"I needed her to know," Hermione said simply. Harry nodded. He had let Hermione read his journal for the same reason.

Hermione passed him on her way to the loo. She stopped and gave him a long kiss. He was still sitting there with a half smile on his face when she returned. Finalizing her decision she straddled him sitting on his lap facing him.

The snogging continued. After a few minutes she pulled back and looked into his eyes.

"How is it possible that we live together, sleep in the same bed most nights and still I have missed you like mad?" Hermione posed the question not expecting an answer. Harry didn't give her one either. Instead he unbuttoned her shirt slowly revealing her black bra. She felt his body react more than it had when she sat down.

Her skirt was up around her waist. She continued to grind herself into him as he explored her breasts. He unsnapped the clasp between them and pushed her back slightly.

"You really like them don't you?" she asked, almost amused feeling him flex.

"You're perfect Hermione," he replied lowering his mouth to one of her nipples. She moaned at the sensation that flowed through her body.

Harry kept her breast in his mouth as she moved around on his pelvis. She could feel him straining to get free.

"I want you," she whispered in his ear. He stopped and looked up at her not daring to hope.

"Are you sure?" he asked. She moved against him harder.

"Yes. I want to know what it feels like to have you inside me," she confessed. He almost came in his pants as she spoke.

He gathered his arms under her bum and carried her to the bed, her legs wrapped around him. He sat her down gently and knelt next to the bed. He pulled her into a gentle kiss hoping that he would live up to her expectations. He would have been surprised that she was thinking the same thing.

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Minerva shook her head and said, "We don't need to hear about that sort of thing Mr. Crow. You can share that story on your other site.

"Yes Professor. I'm sorry."

"Continue with your story, Mr. Crow."

... --- ...

When they awoke the next morning both were surprised to find that the bed was in the middle of the room. Remembering accidental magic, they were amused to realize that they had rearranged all of the furniture. They had to use their wands to put the room back to its normal state when making love again to repair the room didn't work.

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November 17

Voldemort was pleased with the attack on the muggle children but he wanted more.

One objective was to find his potions master and torture him slowly. He was going to have revenge on the man for not checking in for over a week.

His meeting with Greyback was productive. The werewolf had eagerly agreed to join forces and had a keen enough nose to spot any of Potter's foolish traps. In two months time the new Death Eaters and Greyback's werewolves would be ready for a simultaneous attack on Diagon alley and Hogsmeade. The castle walls might be thwarting

him for the moment, but Hogsmeade was undefended and Diagon Alley would soon be his.

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November 20

The next Saturday McGonagall reluctantly agreed to have the Ministry and Board of Governors come in and talk with the students. The Daily Prophet was demanding an investigation. It looked like they were getting it. Beforehand she had called Harry and Hermione into her office.

After they had sat down they were surprised to find Dumbledore's portrait talking with them. He said, "Good evening. I'd offer you a lemon drop, but that jar seems to have run low." Minerva gave him a withering look and he continued. "Alas. It's not important. Thank you both for coming. I am happy to see you both again." He looked at them carefully for a moment confirming with his own eyes the things that Minerva had told him.

He continued, "There are aspects of every position that some would find appealing and others would find distasteful. In Gilderoy Lockhart's case, receiving the attention and glory made his day, while he seemed incapable of actually doing the deeds that he so capably wrote about. Mr. Potter, you're much the opposite. You are a great leader and you bring the actions and skills to back yourself up. Miss Granger, you are a brilliant researcher and an extraordinary companion."

Harry was uncomfortable with where the conversation was going, while Hermione flushed at the praise. Dumbledore continued, "Miss Granger, I must congratulate you on your profound research effort to eradicate Tom's soul fragments from the objects. I daresay I expect that it would have taken me at least another year to have come up with a solution that would have offered the element of safety that yours did. Many lives will doubtless avoid being lost in the future due to your work."

Hermione was beet red, but managed to say, "Thank you Professor. I must admit that my mother and Luna did much of the work."

Dumbledore smiled and said, "I'm certain that there is enough praise to go around. I enjoyed speaking with your mother. The two of you share many excellent qualities."

Minerva made a small noise and Dumbledore's portrait adjusted his spectacles.

"Ah yes. Back to the matter at hand. The stated purpose of the visit tomorrow by the School Governors and the Department of Muggle Secrecy from the Ministry might be to understand what happened and assess the safety at the school, but the real reason is to talk with you two and dig up any dirt that they might find in the hopes of strengthening their own position."

Harry asked, "Do you think they've been infiltrated with Death Eaters?"

Dumbledore considered his words for a moment and replied, "They aren't Death Eaters Harry, rather purebloods and traditionalists. Apparently they would have been happier to have had the Inferi attacked and defended solely with spell work even at the loss of the castle and half of its students than the outcome that took place. In the case of the Ministry, there are those who feel threatened at having fifty wizards bested by a muggle dentist and a truck."

Hermione was visibly nervous that the knowledge of her father's participation in the defense was growing.

"What do you recommend, Professor?" asked Hermione, choosing her words carefully. She knew that Harry had often bristled under Dumbledore's advice. The fact of the matter was Harry was quite capably leading the Order, and she was happy in her role as chief advisor. That said, she would at least hear him out. For over an hour he advised him on the different board members and their viewpoints. Drifting off for a moment, it occurred to Hermione that she was spending more time with the portrait than she had the man.

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Emma had read her daughter's dream journal twice before she mentioned it to Hermione. Hermione's nightmares were as awful as always.

Emma gave her the journal back and then handed her own to Hermione. They talked about nightmares and reality for a while.

"Do you still rearrange the furniture when you have bad dreams?" Emma asked. She wasn't sure what to make of the look Harry and Hermione gave each other. She swore that Hermione smirked before offering up an explanation.

"Once, when I was little, I woke up screaming. All of the furniture in the room was upside down except for the bed. Mum and Dad didn't believe me when I said it had been flying," Hermione told Harry and Diane.

Harry smiled.

"No, I don't," Hermione, answered her mum.

They continued to talk and things were a bit lighter. Diane, Dan and Harry sat through the whole conversation not saying a word.

Dan had not read Hermione's journal but he knew what was in Emma's.

Harry knew what Hermione had been dreaming because she told him about it just as he talked about his nightmares to her.

Diane was just glad to see Hermione and Emma sharing their fears. She knew it would help.

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November 21

The next morning ten students sat in the History of Magic classroom to be interviewed by the Ministry and the Board of School Governors.

Flitwick had selected first year Emily Folgard and seventh year prefect Lisa Turpin represent Ravenclaw. Sprout had selected Megan Jones and Susan Bones, both seventh years from Hufflepuff. Slughorn selected Graham Pritchard and Malcolm Braddock, fourth and fifth year Slytherin students. McGonagall had selected Dean Thomas and fourth year Katlyn Greystone from Gryffindor. Harry and Hermione attended as Head Boy and Head Girl.

Gwynn Morgan from the Ministry was cut along the same mindset as Augusta Longbottom while Katherine Trewent of the Board of Governors reminded Harry of the painting of Mrs. Black. Harry suspected that several of the others had met him several years earlier at his Wizengamot hearing. The only people that he specifically recognized were Amos Diggory and Griselda Marchbanks.

Madam Morgan from the ministry started. "We are gathered today to update both the Ministry and the Board of School Governors on recent events and to satisfy both groups that Hogwarts currently under the leadership of Professor McGonagall is in fact the safest place for our children's education and is demonstrating a proper set of values for our children. This hearing will cover but not be limited to the following topics:

The housing of unauthorized muggles within the school

The destruction of school property

The murder of a student

The overall safety of students residing at the castle

The topics that students are currently being taught

Madam Morgan continued saying, "It is my understanding that three muggles are currently residing in the castle, each in some way related to Miss Granger. Is there a reason that our secrecy laws have been breached to accommodate these three?"

Poppy replied, "Doctor and Doctor Granger are here this term assisting in my personal continued education and are the parents of Miss Granger. They have known of magic for years. Doctor Turnbull's Grandfather was a squib and has known of magic for most of her life. All three of them have been of great assistance to both myself and the students this term." Lisa, Susan and Katlyn nodded in agreement.

Hermione replied, "If you're worried about the expense, it is my understanding that they're all volunteering their time, though their normal fees are somewhat higher than those charged within the wizarding world."

Undaunted, Morgan asked, "Is there any denial that students willfully destroyed Greenhouse One and the contents on October 31?"

McGonagall responded, "With the help of Mr. Longbottom, Susan Bones and funding provided by Mr. Potter, Professor Sprout has promised that Greenhouse One will be back in operation by the start of second term."

Morgan replied, "Professor McGonagall, no question was directed at you. However, since you brought it up, do you deny that the students' actions started one of the school buildings on fire?"

Lisa interjected, "Actually Madam Morgan several of the Inferi were on fire and ran into the greenhouse before they died. Specifically several reanimated Roman soldiers started Greenhouse One on fire."

Morgan said nothing but glowered. The reporters furiously scribbled notes on tablets.

Madam Trewent asked, "And what of the death of Mr. Finch-Fletchley?"

Hermione asked, "Madam Trewent, approximately how many witches and wizards reside in Britain?"

"About 8,000. I believe I was the one doing the..."

Hermione cut her off saying, “Madam Trewent, other than by natural causes how many witches or wizards have lost their lives in Britain in the last twelve months?”

Trewent thought for a moment and replied, “Nearly 700. Why do you ask?”

“That’s over 9 percent. Holding to the same standards, a total of two students or staff residing at Hogwarts have lost their lives at Hogwarts in the last twelve months— Professor Dumbledore and Justin Finch-Fletchley. Using the same ratio that you gave, you would expect that 32 students or staff would have been killed out of about a population at the castle of about 360. Therefore you could argue that living in Hogwarts with Professor McGonagall as Headmistress is fifteen times safer than living in the wizarding world in general. Don’t you agree?”

Trewent realized that she was far outmatched by the debating skills of the young witch, nodded and sat quietly for the remainder of the meeting.

Harry stood up to try and end the meeting as he’d been coached. “Madam Morgan, and members of the Board of Governors, we need to remember that the wizarding world is at war. Death Eaters murdered Professor Dumbledore and Justin under direct or indirect orders from Tom Riddle, the wizard that you know as Lord Voldemort.” He scowled when several people winced at the name.

“For Merlin’s sake, call him Tom Riddle, Voldemort, moldy shorts, whatever you want, but don’t be scared of the name. That’s stupid, and too many good people have given their time, energy or their lives to dishonor them by using that he-who-must-not nonsense. The topics that we’ve learned here helped save our lives. Some of the classes could be better. The Aurors have started using technology from the nonmagical world to save lives and the Muggle Studies class still covers material from 1910 and isn’t even taught by a nonmagical person. The wizarding world needs to catch up.”

The other students stood up and clapped. Lisa and Katlyn replied, "The doctors that were brought in are brilliant. Are you trying to bill them for the food that they've eaten?"

There was an uncomfortable silence from the board.

Katlyn kept going, "Dr. Turnbull helped me a lot after I was hit by an arrow from one of those monsters. Are you trying to send her away?"

Marchbanks was smiling for the last few minutes. She stood and said, "Professor McGonagall, Mr. Potter and the rest of you, we've taken enough of your time for one day. I'm certain that you have better things to do. Please continue as you have been doing. I believe I speak for the majority of the Governors when I say we think that you all have been doing an outstanding job as students, as professors and most importantly, as citizens of the British wizarding world. We will leave you now. Please enjoy the rest of your day."

The reporters scribbled their notes and stood to ask questions. Minister Abraxan shook her head and said, "That will be all for today. Auror cadet Alyx will escort you to Hogsmeade station."

After they had all left McGonagall who realized that among other things, Harry and Hermione had saved her position as Headmistress at the school that she loved so much, looked at the two of them carefully, held out her hand and said, "Thank you both, for everything."

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November 22

Hermione watched as the kids who had been fighting in the library played a pick-up game of Quidditch. It wasn't a rough game and the insults that were traded were good-natured and strictly about the game. They had even divided teams up without following house lines.

Diane was on the sidelines cheering for all of them. She had a thick cloak wrapped around her and she gave Hermione a grateful smile for the warming charm.

The tension in the castle had abated a lot. Everyone seemed to be getting along better and tempers were less frayed. Hermione watched as each of the boys took Diane up on their broom after the game. She seemed to like it and was not as afraid as Hermione would have been.

“How come you never offered to take me for a fly?” Diane asked Hermione as the last boy landed on the pitch. Emma and Harry had arrived with Dan.

“Cause flying is the only thing she sucks at,” Slytherin Anderson Condor told Diane. Hermione glared at him then shrugged.

“I can’t deny the truth,” was all she said as she watched Emma slide on the broom behind Harry. The Firebolt took off at a speed that Hermione was sure muggle physics would not allow. She and her father both flinched.

Emma and Harry had taken to flying around the pitch at speeds that Hermione and Dan couldn’t watch. They always came back laughing and relaxed. Hermione was convinced they were out of their minds. Tonight they didn’t fly in the cold air for long, but came back with a smile on their faces. She hugged them both as they walked back to the castle.

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Chapter 23

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The uproar from the Board of Governors subsided when it became obvious that public opinion was solidly behind the ministry, Potter and the school. The next week drifted by with no news of murders, robberies or other mayhem.

The only other noticeable change was the reported circulation numbers for the Daily Prophet were down by half while those of the Quibbler had more than tripled. Apparently Reggie McDonald's editorials and Whiteheart's articles may have met the approval of Lucius Malfoy, but were not of interest to the common witch or wizard.

Lovegood's operation had really taken off. He had added staff and was seen as the voice for the light side. His coverage of the battle at Hogwarts was corroborated by hundreds of witnesses whereas Whiteheart's attacks on Abraxan, John Thomas and McGonagall were all but unsubstantiated.

Abraxan responded in kind by being certain that Lovegood had first access to the newsmakers while shunting the Daily Prophet's appointments to timeslots that were likely to get cancelled.

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Hermione made a discovery when reviewing the pensive memories from the campers. Malfoy had made a reference to going back to Dolohov's home. She found Alyx and they made their way to Hogsmeade station. Hermione used her cellular telephone to contact Abraxan. She told her what she had discovered, and asked if she could quietly get a location of Dolohov's home.

Abraxan told her that she would take care of it, and that she would contact her within a few weeks.

... --- ...

"Where should we spend the Christmas Holiday?" asked Emma.

"What did you have in mind?" replied Dan.

"Another planet would be nice, but I'd settle for Bermuda, St. John or Brisbane. I suppose we could go back to the brownstone."

"So you're limiting the venues to someplace warm, that doesn't have Inferi gladiators, Death Eaters, dementors or a madman that wants to torture us? Kind of limiting our options, aren't you dear?" Emma asked. She had a feeling that all of the places her husband would like were near a golf course. While she struggled to see the attraction to the game she knew it made him happy.

"That sums it up pretty well for me." They hugged each other as they sat enjoying the warmth of the fire.

"How long is school out for?" She asked thinking about travel time being built into the trip.

"Two and a half weeks."

"Let's leave on the 27th and come back on the third."

"Are you OK with any of the choices?" Dan asked. He knew what his wife was thinking about sandy beaches and he wanted her to be happy too.

"They all sound great. Given that their friend was sent to Australia, maybe we should stick to the Caribbean. St. Kitts would be nice too."

"Let's leave the final choice to Hermione and Harry," Dan told her. She nodded her agreement. Then something else occurred to her.

"Can we afford it?"

"Not really, but can we afford not to? Let's go talk with them."

They walked hand in hand towards the suite. Both were still enamored with the castle. Peeves flew over them and reared back to throw a water balloon at them. He stopped and muttered something

about not wanting to make Harry or Hermione angry. Emma smiled wryly at Dan as the poltergeist flew off. Sometimes they both felt like the kids were taking care of them.

Hermione answered the door and gave both of them hugs. Harry was at his table reading one of the Auror training manuals. He looked up at the two, obviously glad to see them and smiled. "Hi Dan, Hi Emma. How was your day?"

"Excellent," said Dan. "We wanted to talk with you two about taking a holiday after the wedding. We thought someplace warm might be a good choice rather than another ski trip."

"Where?" asked Hermione, easily slipping back into teenaged daughter mode

"We were thinking of someplace in the Caribbean, St. Kitts, St. John or maybe Bermuda. How does that sound?"

"Just a sec..." Harry went into his room and pulled out an expandable folder. After a minute of shuffling he pulled out several sheets of paper with a photograph. He said, "I own some sort of villa on Tortola Island. It's a few miles from St. John and overlooks Cooper bay." He looked at the parchment another minute and said, "It has six bedrooms and three bathrooms." He looked at it again and said, "It also has an adjacent guesthouse."

"Who lives there?" asked Emma.

"No one. Bill told me that it's normally let out by the week. No one is there at the moment."

Hermione said, "What about Susan?"

Harry replied, "There's room for twelve in the main house. The guesthouse has two bedrooms. She should come with us."

"Maybe Tonks and Remus...?"

"I'll ask them if you want?" Hermione and Emma nodded.

Harry called for Brigid and with a flash the swan sized bird appeared, startling Emma.

Harry stroked the beautiful bird for a moment, wrote a quick note on a parchment and asked her, "Can you please take this to Remus?"

A few minutes later Remus and Tonks knocked on their door. "Wotcher Harry? Hello Grangers. What's up?"

"We were wondering if you two wanted to go to Tortola Island with us after your wedding. Harry has a property."

Remus smiled and said, "I went there once with your parents. About nine months later you were born, Harry." He turned to Tonks and said, "It's an amazing place to spend a few days, unless you wanted to stay in Brighton?"

Tonks glanced at Hermione then Harry, who both nodded, hugged Remus and said, "We'd love it. Thank you so much."

"We can leave the afternoon of the 27th. How long would it take to get there?"

Remus replied "About a minute to get to Boston, then another minute to the island by portkey. I think we're about five hours ahead so we could leave mid afternoon and get there late morning."

Emma chuckled remembering her earlier concern about travel times. Dan quipped, "Sure beats flying."

Harry said, "I see Bill tomorrow. I'll ask him to make the arrangements. Who do you want to invite?"

"Susan, Lisa, and Alyx," replied Hermione.

"Don't forget Remus and Tonks," said Harry smiling at Remus. "There was a note on the parchment that said that the guesthouse was quite private."

“How about Diane and Jack,” asked Emma.

“Maybe Bob and Gunner. Thomas is busy.”

“Is he still afraid of you?” asked Tonks smirking at Harry.

“I don’t think he is. We practice together sometimes,” replied Harry.

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The weekend before Christmas Diane, Harry and the Grangers left to return to London. Diane was going home while Dan and Emma were returning to Grimmauld Place. They had an easy time shopping for each other as they all needed beachwear.

Emma overheard Hermione telling Harry, “We’ll work it out.” as she walked by the library a few days before Christmas. She was going to stop and visit with them, but her arms were full of unwrapped gifts.

... --- ...

December 23

The most challenging part of Diane’s work at Hogwarts was a group that had tagged itself The Orphan Brigade. They would meet twice a week and it was always eventful. She was also seeing all twenty-six of the members of the group individually.

Every member had lost both of their parents to this war or the last one. Harry, Susan, Neville and two others were the kids who had grown up without their parents.

Harry, to the surprise of everyone except Diane, had offered to let anyone in the group stay with him for a couple days during the holiday. He didn’t want any of them to be alone at school on Christmas Day.

Most of the group had other family and had declined.

Neville had been looking at spending the holiday at school. Since his Gran had been killed during the attack at the wedding he had no one and was very grateful that he was going to get to spend some time with his friends.

Lisa Turpin didn't want to travel to China to spend the holiday with her brother that she had never gotten along with and eagerly accepted Harry's offer. She had apologized to Hermione a day after the Inferi attack and had become friends since.

Anderson Condor, the Slytherin who had thrown the book at Hermione during the scuffle in the library, had six older sisters. He had told Harry that he didn't want to be forced to choose because no matter what his choice was the other five would get upset.

Harry had traveled with the three students by portkey earlier that afternoon to number twelve.

They, along with the Grangers, Susan, Molly, Arthur and the twins had enjoyed a dinner of pizza, sodas and beer at a local pizzeria. Anderson and Lisa had never had pizza before. Lisa seemed to like it and Anderson, being a thirteen-year-old boy, approved wholeheartedly.

Watching Anderson amused Harry. He seemed to be fascinated by muggle life, much like Arthur. It was a strange site to see the Slytherin boy and the older wizard driving Dan half mad with their questions. Dan liked the boy. He could see the intelligence in Anderson. He offered to teach him and Arthur how to play golf causing his wife to roll her eyes.

Molly was quieter than normal. She was still adjusting to celebrating Christmas without three of her children. Fred and George were subdued also. They each thought about Ron and missed Ginny's mischievous smile.

After dinner they had gone to Trafalgar Square to see the tree from Oslo. Harry had hummed along with the carolers not brave enough to

sing out loud. Hermione had also hummed but she claimed it was because she didn't remember the words. No one believed her.

They had returned to number twelve to find hot chocolate and a warm fire waiting. They all gathered in the living room, talking. Eventually the discussion turned to Christmas memories. Hermione retrieved her pensive and they took turns sharing memories.

Harry watched as Anderson was dressed as an elf by his six older sisters. He was four at the time and his sisters were torturing him with tights and makeup. Dan laughed seeing Lisa and her mum decorating the tree on December first with her father whining good-naturedly. Neville escorting his Grandmother to the ministry Christmas party was funny too. He looked like he wished the floor would swallow him up.

Molly shared a memory of Bill and Charlie pulling Percy and the twins on a sled, all the time asking why they couldn't use magic. Susan showed them a memory of her Aunt Amelia singing Oh Holy Night. Then it was Hermione's turn. She looked thoughtful and put the memory into the bowl.

An eight-year-old Hermione dived out of the way of a snowball. She started packing one of her own and threw it at her father. Dan ducked and it hit Emma. There was an older lady in the memory too. She teamed up with Hermione and they pelted Dan and Emma. Nothing her parents threw at her came close. After a minute of watching Anderson began to laugh. He accused Hermione of using magic, which she didn't deny. Emma explained that the older woman was her mother.

When it was Harry's turn he shared a memory of the Christmas he had spent with Sirius. Sirius was singing about merry hippogriffs. Emma shuddered at the house elf heads and Mrs. Black. He also shared a second memory of the first Christmas dinner he had at Hogwarts. Red heads surrounded him as Ron, Fred, George and Percy sat with him. The memory and the fact that they were all wearing Molly's sweaters made her smile.

Emma was the last to share. Her memory was of Hermione's first Christmas. She walked into her living room and found Dan holding baby Hermione. The two of them were looking at the tree and Dan was talking softly to his newborn baby daughter. He was telling her the story of Jesus' birth. Emma watched for a few moments and then sat down next to Dan. She took her daughter into her arms and Dan kept talking. Little Hermione was hanging onto every word.

Seeing Emma holding Hermione like that made Harry wonder what his girlfriend would look like with a baby in her arms. He felt himself smiling and he took Hermione's hand. While he didn't have any good memories of his childhood at the Dursley's, he was happy to share in his friend's memories.

They started discussing Christmas traditions and Harry just sat back and listened. When asked about the Dursley's traditions he just shrugged.

"The Grunnings Christmas party was always on the twenty fourth. Christmas day was always at the house with Aunt Marge," he said. Hermione could tell there was a lot more to it than that but didn't press him.

As the conversation continued he felt himself getting sadder. He had no idea what traditions his parents had celebrated. His aunt never mentioned any and he knew not to ask her questions.

After a while he left the room with the excuse that he had to use the loo. Hermione found him fifteen minutes later, sitting on the staircase on the third stair from the bottom. His head was in his hands and he was trying to not cry.

When Hermione pulled him close it was like a dam opening up. A few minutes later Emma joined them and held him from behind. Eventually his tears slowed and Emma asked him what was wrong.

"I'm sorry. I'm ruining Christmas," he said.

“No you’re not, Harry. I...” Hermione hesitated and then continued, “I was going to say that I understand. I don’t really but I am here anytime you need me.”

“Me too,” Emma told him.

Harry wasn’t sure why but the words started spilling out.

“I told you that the Dursley’s went to the Grunnings party every year. They never took me. They left me with Mrs. Figg or locked me in my cupboard. They would get home and Dudley would have some really expensive present and he would make sure to play with it in front of me. Christmas Day, Aunt Petunia would make me make breakfast for them. She never let me eat any of it because Dudley was in such a hurry to open his presents. After watching Dudley open all of his presents they would lock me in the cupboard. They told me little freaks didn’t get Christmas presents or Christmas dinner. The cupboard was right off the kitchen. I could smell it all day and not have any,” he said choking on his words. Emma silently pulled him into an embrace and cursed Petunia Dursley in her head.

Hermione hugged her lover from behind wishing she could change his memories.

Harry went to wash his face and actually use the loo and Emma asked Hermione about Harry’s childhood. She knew that his childhood was not exactly happy but his comments about the cupboard really made her wonder. Hermione explained and was on the verge of losing her temper when Emma took her hand.

“You have a good man there, love. After all the things that those nasty people did to him he still had it in his heart to protect them. The message of the season is love, peace and forgiveness. Today isn’t the time to talk about his relatives. Let’s just be there for him,” Emma said.

Hermione agreed. Harry seemed okay when he returned to the living room but Hermione wasn’t fooled. The rest of the night she sat with him and they held hands.

As they went their separate ways before going to bed, she gave him a firm hug. She was just starting to brush her hair when he apparated into her room. She smiled as he took her brush and began stroking her hair as he gently kissed the back of her head.

As they lay down to go to sleep, she vowed that she would give him a lifetime of happy Christmases.

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Christmas Eve started out as a depressing day at number twelve.

Susan, Lisa and Neville all left early, Susan and Lisa to go visit their parents' graves, and Neville to St. Mungo's for his annual visit to Frank and Alice in the long term care ward. Anderson's parents were buried in the same cemetery as Emma's parents so Hermione side along apparated Emma and then Anderson to the cemetery. Neville was the last to return as he also visited his Grandmother and Great Uncle's graves.

After everyone had left it occurred to Harry that he didn't even know where his parents were buried. He had never asked anyone. He usually just talked to the air above his bed if he wanted to say something to them.

While they were gone Dan and Harry had a short talk. Dan let Harry know that he was there for him. He had been horrified at what Emma had told him the night before. Harry didn't want to dwell on it, so he magically set up a nine-hole putting green on the third floor. Arthur joined them hitting the balls, feeling like a real muggle with a huge smile on his face. Molly just shook her head at the men.

The day got better as it continued. All of them had fun trimming the tree and drinking eggnog. The house felt peaceful as they sang carols and laughed a lot. Harry felt his sadness lifting. He knew better than to live in the past.

Molly and Anderson were playing an epic game of chess. Molly's playing style reminded Harry very strongly of Ron. He knew that Anderson wouldn't stand a chance.

Harry wondered how his buddy was doing. He had shared the last report he received on Ron with Molly and Arthur who were grateful for the news.

The rest of Harry's evening was spent relaxing by the fire with Hermione. He sat with his back against one of the love seats and she sat between his legs. He stared into the fire as she read, occasionally making a comment about the text. He wasn't paying attention.

Instead his mind was wandering back to Emma's Christmas memory. It was the perfect representation of what Harry wanted out of life. He wanted to sit on the sofa, with his wife and baby watching the Christmas tree.

He leaned close to Hermione's ear and kissed it gently. She looked at him questioningly as they were in the living room with everyone else. He smiled.

"I was just thinking," he said as she shut her book. He kept his voice low and squeezed her a little more.

"About?" she asked in a tone as soft as his.

"Kids. Do you want to have any?" he asked. Her jaw dropped. That was about the last thing she had expected.

"Sure. In the future," she told him. He nodded and turned back to watch the fire.

After a short while he asked, "How many?"

"More than one," she commented sitting up and turning so she could see his face. She knew that this wasn't as casual of a conversation as he was making it seem to be.

"Five?" he asked hesitantly.

"Five? Want to side your own Quidditch team?" she asked and he snickered.

“Well, we better have ten then. Some of them might take after you and not like flying.” He smiled looking into the depths of her eyes.

She laughed, hoping it was true.

“What brought this on?” she asked him.

“Family. I want to have a bunch of children to give happy Christmas memories to.”

He saw the shadow pass over her face for a second but then it was gone. She put her hand to his cheek and smiled.

“You’re going to be a great dad someday,” she whispered.

“But not today,” he said. He leaned in and kissed her gently. The kiss’ length passed a minute when they both remembered that they were in a room filled with people that included her parents. Anderson making noises like he was going to vomit was a good clue. They both looked up sheepishly.

Molly cleared her throat and crossed her arms. Emma was smiling and Dan looked a little shell-shocked. Arthur was oblivious as he was intently taking apart the old CD player that Harry had let him experiment on.

“I’m sure I don’t want to know what you two are talking about,” Susan said amused. She and Lisa were grinning. Neville looked at them thoughtfully.

Emma snickered. Hermione rolled her eyes but Harry chuckled. He picked up Hermione’s book and opened it to the marked page. They pretended to read, ignoring the rest of the room.

The other teens teased Anderson about snogging when he started in on how gross it was. Dan mentioned that as he grew older he would learn more about girls and find that kissing a girl really wasn’t that bad. Anderson retorted that he had six sisters and if there was

anything to know about girls that he didn't already know then he didn't want to know it.

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Christmas Day started out a lot nicer than Christmas Eve had. The group was quieter than usual. They were attending an early church service at the Granger's church in Crawley. The early hour saw them subdued. Emma was quite happy, as she had missed going to church since they had moved into number twelve.

The Grangers were the only ones that had been to a muggle church service before. Dan was going to ask Harry about the Dursley's but thought better of it.

Harry was excited. He had never been to a service before but one of his best childhood memories was of meeting a pastor who was teaching in the park. The man had been extremely kind to Harry who looked like a ruffian with the black eye Dudley had given him. Harry had come back several times to see the man but his Aunt had put a stop to it, afraid of what people might think.

Arthur and Anderson were both excited about getting to experience some muggle life. Hermione transfigured their robes into suitable muggle clothes. Anderson was primping in the mirror when Emma and Harry came up behind him.

"You look fine Casanova," Harry told him. Emma smiled.

"You make a lovely muggle, Andy," she said. Anderson smiled his best smile at her and then stuck his tongue out at Harry.

Susan and Lisa were spending the morning with Alyx and her family. The others left by portkey and landed in a parking structure not far from the church. Hermione set some wards around them and then Emma led the way.

As they walked up the path to the church the sun was beginning to peek over the horizon. It was cold but there was no wind. Harry

decided that it was almost perfect. He took Hermione's hand and squeezed it.

The pastor was happy to see the Grangers and there were hugs all around. Hermione introduced her friends and then pulled Harry into the church. Anderson and Neville followed closely behind them.

"Wow," Anderson said looking up at to see the sunlight shining through the stained glass windows near the ceiling. Neville's mouth dropped open as he looked up.

"That's beautiful," Harry said in awe.

The choir was on the risers and they were singing. Harry listened to the unfamiliar song for a moment and then was over come with a feeling of peace. When it finished he asked Hermione the name of the song and she told him it was called Oh Come All Ye Faithful. She seemed saddened that he was unfamiliar with it but when she considered his childhood she was not surprised.

Hermione led them to an empty pew and found herself surrounded by boys. She had seen Harry's reaction to the church and wondered what was going through his mind.

After the pastor had spoken for a bit, a group of children preformed the annual production of the birth of Christ. Harry noted that Arthur was just as enraptured as Anderson and Neville were. Harry smiled when Hermione told him that she had played a sheep one year when she was little. He smirked and ran a finger over a tendril of her bushy hair that had escaped her braid. She gently poked him in the side and smirked back at him.

After the play was over and the pastor spoke more about the meaning of Christmas the choir began to sing again. Harry and Hermione followed along in the hymnal but neither sang. The row in front of them all turned around to see who was singing when Anderson and Neville both started singing. They sounded fantastic.

After the service was completed people began to gather and talk. Many members of the church approached the Grangers and asked

about them. Hermione left her friends to become the dutiful daughter. Harry watched her from his seat, only half listening to Molly fuss over Neville and Anderson.

"Hello, Mr. Potter. Happy Christmas," a voice said and Harry looked up. Diane was standing there with a very serious looking man. Harry smiled at her.

"Dr. Turnbull, how nice to see you. Happy Christmas," he said formally and she laughed.

She introduced her husband, Jack, to the three boys and the Weasley's. They chatted a bit while waiting on the Grangers. Harry immediately put Jack in the same category that he had filed John Thomas - he was silent and intimidating. Harry could also tell that he thought the world of Diane. Harry liked the man.

They talked for a while and as they parted Jack shook Harry's hand and said, "I look forward to seeing you tonight and getting to know you better."

When they returned to number twelve the portkey took them to the back garden area. It was an overgrown mess that Harry would like to fix one day. As they began to walk to the door Hermione picked up a pile of snow, formed a ball and threw it at her father. Dan looked at her for a second, grinned, and then retaliated. It didn't take long before a full-fledged snowball fight had erupted.

The shrieking and laughter continued and soon they were all covered in snow. Wet and cold, they entered the house to have brunch. Winky had set up a large buffet of breakfast and other choices. After changing their clothes they all dug in. The laughter had followed them inside the house.

Emma had been impressed with Anderson and Neville's voices and kept attempting to get them to sing again. After a while Anderson broke into the Hogwarts school song in a style that made Dan think of American Jazz music. Neville joined him after a verse. They got a round of applause when done. Anderson looked pleased and Neville looked embarrassed.

After brunch they entered the living room to open presents. Lisa and Susan had not returned but they decided to not wait.

Chaos reigned as they all opened their gifts at the same time. Everyone received a Molly Weasley jumper, including Dan and Emma. Harry caught only about a fourth of the madness but noticed a few of the gifts that drew the best reaction.

Harry had gotten Anderson a Celtic cross earring. Molly objected as the dark haired Slytherin put it on and wondered where the other one was. Anderson had given Harry a handwritten book on the values of being Slytherin. Both were happy with their gifts.

Dan gave Harry a new putter. Harry snickered and thanked him mentioning that Hermione had broken his last one. Hermione gave him a cover for his new putter and a beautifully framed picture of himself, Hermione, Ron and Ginny from their fifth year. She also smirked and whispered that the rest of his present was upstairs in her bedroom. Neville gave him a book that Diane had recommended to him about overcoming obstacles. Harry nodded understanding and thanked his friend.

Arthur exclaimed loudly when he opened the books that Hermione had found for him. He examined *How Things Work: The Physics of Everyday Life* by Louis A. Bloomfield, *The New Way Things Work* by David Macaulay and *How Things Are Made: From Automobiles to Zippers* by Sharon Rose and Neil Schlager with great joy.

Molly gasped when she opened the painting that Harry had commissioned. He had gone into his pensive with his camera and taken a couple pictures of each of the Weasley children. The painting showed all of them in a scene on the paddock behind where the Weasley home had stood. Molly cried a bit and almost smothered Harry with her hug.

Dan was excited to receive a card that stated the date and time of a reservation at the St. Andrews Old Course. He noted that it was for a foursome and invited Harry almost instantly. Emma innocently asked

Hermione if she wanted to go shopping on the third Saturday in June, drawing a laugh from her daughter.

Hermione loved the binding runes that Harry purchased for her. She translated them for the rest - Luck, success, protection, health and creativity. He also gave her a couple of books that she had been looking for. He also had another gift for her that he had left upstairs. Her parents had given her a couple of muggle textbooks that she had asked for.

Neville was impressed with the Longbottom clan wall plaque that Hermione had found for him. He also loved the muggle board games that Emma had gotten him. Anderson received a matching set. They agreed that Risk and Clue looked intriguing.

Harry waited until the chaos was almost over before he slipped into the seat next to Emma. He handed her a small box and smiled.

"This is from me and Hermione," he told her. Hermione watched as her mum opened the little box. Dan glanced over her shoulder and smiled when he saw the ring.

"A mother's ring?" Emma asked softly.

"Do you like it?" Hermione asked. Emma nodded and slipped it on her right hand. To her surprise the sapphire stone vibrated a bit and then moved. Four other stones joined it. She examined it and looked to Harry for an explanation. He grinned.

"It will adjust the number of stones to how many children you have. Apparently you think a lot of me and Susan," he said softly. "Thanks."

"Brilliant," Hermione whispered.

Emma hugged Harry tightly. "I love you," she told him. He squeezed her a bit tighter and then sniffled. They laughed when they realized they were both crying.

"I'm not sure why it has five stones," Harry said examining the ring.

“Hermione was the only child of ours to survive. We had a stillbirth and a miscarriage before she was born. Both of those children would have had May birthdays,” she said tracing the three emeralds, one sapphire and one ruby.

“Susan’s birthday is May 13,” Hermione said looking at the ring.

“It’s beautiful,” Dan declared. He looked like he might cry too. Hermione hugged him tightly.

Molly fussed over the ring and then the Weasleys left to join their boys at the twins’ flat.

Emma found herself glancing at the ring off and on all afternoon. Dan had taken the seat next to her. He held her hand and spoke softly to her as to not disturb the kids.

Dan was watching as Hermione attempted to teach the boys how to play Monopoly when it hit him. His daughter had grown from a sometimes troubled, often too lonely little girl into a brilliant young woman. Her lover, and Dan really hated thinking of Harry that way, was a terrific young man.

“She’s not a little girl anymore is she?” Dan asked his wife softly as he watched his daughter try to teach two pureblood boys how to play Monopoly. Emma laughed gently.

“She hasn’t been for a long time, love,” Emma told him.

“I guess on some level I knew that,” he responded. She gave him a small smile. He voiced his thought, “No Dad wants to see their little princess all grown up.”

“We got lucky. She’s a terrific woman,” Emma told him but she was surprised when he shook his head.

“She has great parents. Especially her Mum,” Dan said softly.

They watched Hermione and her friends for a while longer and then Emma spoke again.

“Do you ever think about how much she has lost in this war?”

Dan pulled her closer and sighed.

“Yes. We’ve been very lucky so far. Hermione has lost several of her good friends. Harry’s lost almost everything. Then there’s us. We lost a nice house but we even had time to get the important stuff out first,” he said.

“I know. I feel terrible about feeling sorry for us when I think of what Harry, Susan and Neville have missed in their lives,” Emma told him. Dan pulled her even closer and kissed her temple.

“There by the grace of God go we,” he murmured. She held on tight knowing it was the truth.

They watched Hermione, frustrated in her effort to teach them, charm the game to be a magical version with Honeydukes and Hogwarts as Park Place and Boardwalk. They played most of the afternoon with Anderson winning by a large margin. Dobby and Winky popped in and out of the room wearing the new wool outfits that Harry and Hermione had gotten them. Dobby had a new four-button suit jacket and matching trousers, Winky had a matching grey dress. Harry had also given them a bottle of German wine.

Harry joined Emma and Dan on the couch as Neville and Anderson convinced Hermione to teach them a muggle card game. Emma slipped her arm around Harry and he leaned into her. He looked up and smiled. Dan was napping on her other side and was using her as a pillow.

Harry felt himself dozing off and was happy to let the feeling over take him. A few minutes later Hermione looked over at them and smiled. Hermione retrieved her camera and took a picture of the three of them napping. It was a perfect moment, she decided.

Hermione moved everyone to the library not wanting to disturb her family. Neville and Anderson played games while she read. Her father entered the room a little while later looking refreshed.

"Mum and Harry still napping?" Hermione asked looking up from her book. Dan nodded and leaned down to kiss her forehead. Dan sat across from her and started to read the paper.

Hermione returned to her book. She looked up several times to find Dan staring at her. After the fifth time she spoke.

"What is it Dad?" she asked warily thinking about some of the things that her mother had spoken of while wearing that look.

"It's hard on an old man to realize that his baby has grown up," he told her cryptically. She thought about it and then realized that he was really seeing her as she was and not his little girl.

She hugged him and repeated what she had told him at her birthday. It made him smile and she kissed him on the cheek. His little brown-eyed girl may have grown up but in the end she would always be his daughter.

...---...

Tom Riddle woke up in a cold sweat with his heart pounding hard. What a horrid dream. As reality set in he scowled harder.

Ghosts of Christmas past. Nonsense.

He put the dream out of his head. He had no use for the idiocy of fear. He was not afraid of the future. He was still immortal, as the putter hadn't been found. Potter was probably too afraid to re-enter the Chamber.

There was nothing that was going to stop him from his goal. Not even Potter and his mudblood bitch. His mood was horrible and he felt his power level rise. Today would be a good day to show Draco Malfoy exactly what thieves received for Christmas.

It never occurred to him that he hadn't dreamed since he had first split his soul.

...---...

Emma woke up when Harry began to move around. She looked at the young man and decided that the dream he was having was not a good one. She held him close and spoke soft words to him as he slept. She had done this many times with her daughter and her childhood nightmares.

Harry eventually stopped jerking in his sleep. He relaxed against her and murmured, "I love you, Mum."

She closed her eyes and wished that Lily Potter could hold her son while he had bad dreams. Since that was impossible, Emma swore that she would do her best to be a good stand-in. Harry needed to be loved and not just in the way Hermione loved him.

He woke up a little while later with no memory of calling her Mum. She didn't tell him instead keeping that memory for herself.

They joined the others. Diane and Jack had arrived. Susan and Lisa had also returned. Jack and Dan were giving Hermione and Anderson a run for their money in Monopoly. Diane was talking to Neville about gardening. There was a lot of laughter in the room.

Harry hesitated in the doorway. He looked over his friends and his family. He grabbed Emma's hand and squeezed it. She looked at him puzzled and he grinned. It was a perfect Christmas moment, just as he always had wished for.

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Meanwhile former Hogwarts professor Severus Snape sat on the cement bunk in the Ministry holding cell contemplating his life. Certainly he had made his share of poor decisions, but felt that much of his life's path had been set by environment. His family life growing up had been mediocre at best. His mother had cared about him but his father had been abusive and generally had a bad disposition.

He'd had no visitors, either because they weren't allowed or because he had no friends. In reality, he'd killed or helped kill the only two people who'd ever befriended him, Lily Evans and Albus Dumbledore.

He would face trial in a few days and most likely be put to death shortly after. Tonks' words still bit at him, "They're the last you'll ever see." Lucius's story of the graveyard conversation between the Dark Lord and Potter took on a new meaning to him. "Yes, your father was brave. He faced me like a man." He vowed to himself that he would face his own death like a man.

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Boxing Day

Hermione, Emma, Diane, Lisa and Alyx along with Dobby and Winky had decorated the formal dining room at number twelve the night before. After some work and a lot of magic the room looked as if it were a multi colored rose garden. To their surprise Lisa was able to charm the ceiling to look like the sky on a perfect day. Hermione added a gentle continuous breeze.

There was a ten-foot ring of white rocks in the middle of the room. Intertwined within the rocks was ivy. Just inside the ring was another circle. This one was made of water that gently flowed in a counter clockwise direction. Floating in the water were a number of lilies and tulips. In the middle of the circle was a perfect eternal blue bell flame.

Tonks had shrieked with joy when she saw the room.

The wedding guests entered the room and gathered outside of the circle. Remus and Tonks were standing on each side of Minister Abraxan. Abraxan was standing behind a rock that was larger than the others. After all of the guests had situated themselves around the circle Abraxan pulled out her wand.

Tonks was wearing a ruby red set of robes but her hair was her natural black. Remus was in mostly white with trim that matched

Tonks. His face looked years younger and he wore an easy smile. They looked fabulous.

Harry stood between Hermione and Diane. The wedding was different enough from Bill and Fleur's to ward off any feelings of fear. The guest list had been limited to twenty-five. It was an eclectic group that had gathered. The only relative for either Tonks or Remus was Ted Tonks' older brother, Michael.

Minister Abraxan had not performed a wedding where neither person had any living parents for many years. She had been happy to be asked to officiate at this one. The spunky young Auror reminded Abraxan of a younger version of herself.

Abraxan began a long complex spell. She was blessing the circle making the rocks glow slightly. She stopped and smiled as she stepped into the circle. Then she faced the couple.

"I invite you to join me in this sacred circle. Cross the water and the earth to join me only if by your own volition, without being compelled and with no restraint," she said.

Tonks stepped over the rocks with grace. Harry held his breath praying she wouldn't trip. Remus stepped over the rocks and water and stumbled a little. Harry heard Dan mutter something about the couple being perfect for each other.

"As the element of air surrounds us, the elements of earth and water encircle us, join me at the element of fire," Abraxan said to them.

Harry listened to Abraxan expound on the elements and relate them to Tonks and Remus. He took Hermione's hand and caught her eye. He was rewarded with a beautiful smile.

"It is not often that the parents of both the bride and groom have preceded them. It is a sign of our times that this is the case today. As is tradition I ask that all of the mothers present step into the circle and give your blessing upon the couple."

Emma stepped over the rocks and water. Abraxan nodded to Fleur who, with one hand on her abdomen, joined Emma.

The women repeated the blessing that Abraxan gave them and then the process was repeated with Dan, Bill and Michael Tonks giving the blessing as fathers.

“In the spirit of Andromeda and Theodore Tonks and Galileo and Jillian Lupin we all offer you the blessings of those who came before you.”

Abraxan spoke of what makes a strong marriage. Passion for each other, growth together, freedom, courage and love. Harry liked the message.

As was the Druid tradition Tonks and Remus wrote their vows to each other. Hermione's eyes filled with tears as she listened. Harry squeezed her hand. He noticed that Dan was standing behind Emma with his arms around her waist. Emma was crying too. He caught Dan's eye and shrugged. Dan smiled.

Tonks and Remus sealed their vows with an R rated kiss. As they snogged, red and yellow rose petals fell from the charmed sky.

The ceremony ended with the sharing of bread and mead between the couple. They fed each other and then walked the circle sharing with their friends.

After they stepped from the circle Abraxan waved her wand a couple times and the circle shrank into a glass dome.

“Congratulations,” offered Abraxan as she handed it to Tonks with a smile. Tonks grinned like a schoolgirl.

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Emma smiled as she and her daughter watched Tonks and Remus dance their first dance as husband and wife.

“They’re good for each other,” Emma observed. Hermione agreed and watched the couple finish. Tonks came towards them and Remus towards where Dan was standing with Michael, Jack and Harry. Both of the Granger women hugged Tonks.

“I want to thank you for the blessing,” Tonks told Emma.

“It was my pleasure. You and Remus deserve a lifetime of happiness,” Emma told her.

“The ceremony was beautiful Tonks... err should I call you Lupin now?” Hermione asked. Tonks laughed.

“I’ll always be Tonks though I wouldn’t object to being called Mrs. Lupin,” she said with an easy grin.

All three of the women laughed.

“It’s wonderful to have such a happy occasion during all of the darkness,” Emma said looking around. Tonks nodded.

“We were going to wait but then we figured that waiting would be a win for them,” Tonks said as Diane joined them.

“Life is too short to not live it,” Hermione commented. The older women all looked at her.

“That’s quite profound,” Diane told her.

“Ginny told me that once. She lived it too. I’m glad you decided to live Auror Lupin,” Hermione told them. Tonks let out a peal of laughter.

“Me too,” she answered.

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Remus joined Dan, Harry, Jack and Michael as they discussed golf. He listened in on the conversation and wondered what they were talking about. When he finally got his opening he thanked Dan and Michael the same as Tonks had Emma.

"Ted would have loved to have given you his blessing," Michael commented.

"I don't know about that. You know what a hard time he gave me when I asked him for permission to marry Tonks," Remus commented.

"That had to be frightening," Harry said.

"Don't worry about it mate. If the bird is worth it then you'll work up the nerve," Michael told him. Harry wrinkled his nose at the thought of calling Hermione a bird.

"Been thinking about popping the question, Harry?" Remus asked, trying not to laugh at Harry's discomfort.

"Uh... not until quite recently," Harry admitted.

Dan was about to take a sip of his beer but the glass stopped half way to his mouth.

"You're a little young to be thinking about that aren't you?" Jack asked. He was amused by Dan's reaction.

"I thought I we should finish school before I even consider talking to her parents about it," Harry answered. He was watching Dan for a reaction.

"Parents? Is it different in the wizarding world? I thought you had to get the girl's father's permission," Michael commented. He had loved his wizard brother but didn't understand all of the differences in their worlds.

"I reckon so but I respect her Mum too much to not include her," Harry answered.

"Maybe you should ask her Godparents too," Jack said with a smirk.

Dan laughed and said, "Be glad you don't have to ask her Grandfather for permission."

Jack let out a loud laugh and Dan said, "Oh sure, laugh it up. He liked you."

"Emma's father didn't like you?" Remus asked. The women were approaching and Emma heard the question. She gave her husband a look.

"Daddy liked you just fine," she said to Dan. Dan looked at the men and shook his head.

"Her father was a WW2 war hero. He was at Normandy Beach and witnessed the surrender by the Germans. The man was scary on his good days and terrifying on his bad ones," Dan said.

"He was a teddy bear," Emma told them as she pulled her husband to the dance floor.

When they finished their dance, they went to get something to drink. As Dan was pouring Emma watched Harry and Hermione slow dance. It occurred to her that the next wedding she attended she could probably be the mother of the bride. She was surprised to find that she liked the idea.

... --- ...

Harry and Hermione had left several methods for McGonagall and Thomas to contact them in the event of an emergency. Moody gave them all a lecture about maintaining constant vigilance.

Emma who had been the organizer of their previous trips had spent a fair amount of time obtaining proper documents for the others. The wizarding world was easily a hundred years behind the nonmagical world in terms of birth certificates, passports and the like. In the end she had collected the statistics needed for the documents and gave the information to Minister Abraxan who produced seven sets of documents the next day.

Their bags were all packed, shrunk and placed in the small backpack that Hermione carried. For traveling they wore sweatshirts over short-

sleeved shirts, and trousers. They all could pass as muggles. They each held their passports, driver licenses, cash in their pockets and took hold of the hula-hoop. At 3PM it activated. For half a minute they felt like they were flying through a wind tunnel, then they landed with a thud.

The attendant looked up and saw them. He reminded Harry of Stan Shunpike. "Welcome to the Logan international visitor center. My name is Jerry Johnson. May I see your passports please? What is your final destination?"

Emma took control. "Good morning Mr. Johnson. We're on our way to Tortola Island via St. Thomas."

Jerry checked the list on his clipboard and saw Alyx group – party of thirteen. "Right this way Ma'am." He led them to a waiting room checked his watch and said, "Your portkey is scheduled to activate in three minutes."

Five minutes later they were in the immigration line in St. Thomas looking at the sign that read, Welcome to the Virgin Islands.

Remus took over when they cleared customs. "Good day sir. We would like tickets on the ferry to Tortola." They walked down to the docks and got on the ferryboat from St. Thomas to Tortola. Dan got on last. He'd been talking with one of the agents at the reservation counter. He nodded to Harry.

They took the Red Hook ferry ride from St. Thomas to Tortola Island. Harry gawked at the bluest skies and the bluest water that he'd ever seen. It was warm and sunny. Within minutes they peeled off their sweatshirts. Too soon it seemed they'd reached Tortola Island. As they walked up the dock they took in the colors and the fresh smell. The blues seemed bluer, the yellows seemed brighter. After they again cleared customs they walked out the door to a carnival of the sights, sounds and bright colors of the Caribbean.

"Where to Gov?" asked the thin attendant at the hire car counter.

Dan looked at the hire car agent and replied, "We need two vans to take us to the Crow's Nest house. It's by Turnbull Hill. We'll be staying a week."

"Sure t'ing Gov. Where's your luggage?"

"We had it sent earlier," replied Hermione. In truth, she had everyone's bags shrunk in her knapsack. Dan paid the agent and he showed them to the vans. He handed Dan and Jack each a map of the island, the keys and pointed out the directions.

They got in the vans and a half hour later had found their way to the villa. Harry got in one of the nine-passenger vans and they made their way along the beach for a mile until they turned onto the winding Great Mountain road. It wasn't far, only a few miles but along the way they climbed some twelve hundred feet. Harry felt his ears pop once as they made their way back and forth up the switchbacks. He smiled looking at the tourist map that they were given noting that the villa was on Turnbull hill. Finally the driver turned onto a long driveway. Hermione noted that the sign read Crow's Nest.

They stopped and got out. The view was breathtaking – a combination of palm trees, pines and the bluest sky that he'd ever seen. Looking down they could see the light blue waters of the ocean.

Hermione squeezed Harry's hand and said. "It's so beautiful."

Harry just nodded and said, "I've got the house keys here." He handed Remus the other set.

Remus smiled and said, "We'll go check out the guest cottage."

Tonks stood on her tiptoes, kissed Harry on the cheek and whispered, "Thank you, Harry."

He just nodded and replied, "No worries. I'll see you later."

The villa was quite large but simple. On the upper level were six bedrooms and three bathrooms with a walkway around them. The center was open creating a very open feel to the home. Three of the

bedrooms had ocean views with sliding glass doors leading to a wooden deck and a pool. The three on the other side of the wide hallway were well appointed and also had their own private decks.

The first floor had a spacious food prep area, a large informal eating area and a large great room. Bill had made arrangements to have the pantry stocked. As Emma looked around, it was obvious that nothing was lacking.

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Prior to arriving, Emma had a somewhat embarrassing conversation with Harry and Hermione letting them know that they had their blessing to sleep in the same room. As such Harry and Hermione shared the room next to Jack and Diane. Harry had insisted that Dan and Emma take the master bedroom on the other side of Diane.

Hermione took everyone's luggage out of her backpack, carefully set the pieces on the floor and charmed them back to their regular size. Jack was amazed at their goddaughter's ability. Diane whispered, "That's nothing. You should see her when she really gets going."

... --- ...

Surprising no one, Hermione and the witches wanted to go visit the beaches. Dan, Emma, Diane and Jack decided to sit outside by the pool, so Harry, Bob and Gunner went with the witches. Hermione carefully drove the van. She was the only one of the bunch who had actually acquired her driver's license by means of attending class and passing a test. They made their way back down the winding road and took the turnoff to drive along the north coast. They drove past beautiful beaches, dive and snorkel rental equipment shops, bars, and an interesting building that advertised, Swim with the dolphins. Hermione had read about them and explained how they worked.

They decided to stop at Brewer's Bay, a beautiful crescent shaped bay with a beach that wasn't very crowded. Hermione and Susan conjured up some beach blankets and the witches all removed their tee shirts and shorts and stretched out to sunbathe. The three wizards just stopped to appreciate the view. All four of the witches

had chosen string bikinis, and when they rolled over onto their stomachs and untied the strings in back the wizards had to swallow hard. Harry was glad his swim trunks were so baggy. Hermione turned and smiled at him and motioned to the sunscreen. Harry didn't have to be asked twice and moved up next to her to put the sunscreen on her back. Bob and Gunner quickly showed why they were in Ravenclaw and offered to help the other girls. As Bob spread lotion on Alyx and Gunner helped out Lisa Harry noticed Susan looking over at Bob and Alyx sadly. He quickly moved over and offered to do Susan's back too. After she smiled and thanked him he turned back to Hermione.

Her back felt so soft and warm as he continued to rub the lotion in much longer than necessary. Hermione wasn't objecting, lying there contentedly and purring much like Crookshanks. Eventually Harry moved down to do her legs, gradually working his way up from her feet. As he got to the top of her legs he couldn't stop himself from sliding his fingers under the edge of her swimsuit bottom, rationalizing that he needed to make sure he covered her completely with the lotion. His heart was pounding in his chest by the time he was finished, and when he heard Hermione gasp he knew he'd better stop. He lay down between her and Susan and turned to gaze at her.

They looked into each others' eyes communicating their love without a word being spoken. Harry reached out and put his arm on her back and Hermione sighed contentedly. After a while Hermione reached back and retied her top, and sat up behind him and returned the favor with the sunscreen. Harry noticed that she also took much longer to rub the lotion onto his back than necessary, and he appreciated her hands caressing her back as much as she had his.

Soon Harry began to get restless and Hermione suggested going snorkeling. He followed her into the water unable to keep his eyes off of her figure. So much skin and so little fabric. She showed him how to put on the mask and fins and they pushed off and floated away kicking slowly. Hermione grasped his hand as they drifted over the grassy bottom, which quickly turned to sand dotted with coral heads. Brewer's Bay was one of the prime snorkeling spots in Tortola and colorful fish darted in and out of gently waving sea fans and other soft corals. A small blue damselfish with fluorescent light blue spots

appeared and disappeared in a honeycombed piece of rock. A multicolored parrotfish gnawed noisily on a coral outcropping and a large school of midnight blue tangs swept by. A pair of four-eyed butterflies moved along just out of reach, never separating for more than a moment before rejoining.

Over and over Harry found his eyes returning to watch Hermione as she swam alongside him, his own beautiful mermaid come to life. Every so often she caught him looking and smiled back shaking her head at him. She had bought a waterproof copy of a guide to corals and fishes of the Caribbean and kept trying to stop and tell him the names of the fish and corals they saw, but he was mostly interested in the beautiful creature next to him. As they finally swam back and waded out of the water and back to the beach blanket Harry found himself wishing that this day would never end.

Hermione, Susan, Alyx, Tonks and Lisa wanted to visit the swim with the dolphin center, meaning that Harry, Gunner and Bob were talked into going along. "Come on Gunner," said Lisa. "They'll be a lot more fun than some old grindy low." They were amazed at the strength of the beautiful and brilliant dolphins. The attendants were amazed how friendly their dolphins acted with the swimmers. It was a great afternoon.

Several hours later and a bit redder they shook the sand out of their towels and made their way back to the van. Alyx asked to stop in a convenience store and Bob got out as well. She had looked stunning in her swimsuit and Bob had obviously noticed, having taken plenty of time with the sunscreen himself. They got back in the van a few minutes later carrying a bag that had packages of marshmallows, chocolate and graham crackers.

... --- ...

After they had been there a few days Diane asked Harry to take her over to Shark Bay. The area was breathtaking. The water was quite shallow for at nearly two hundred yards and the beach sand was a beautiful pink formed from millions of crushed shells. The beach was nearly deserted as they walked along the water's edge.

“Thank you for bringing us here Harry. Jack and I needed some time together and I needed a break from monsters.” She smiled at him and said, “You probably wanted a break yourself.”

Harry nodded as they walked along. He picked up a little shell and threw it back into the water. “This place is great. I could stay here forever.”

“That’s the point Harry. You could stay here forever, marry Hermione and raise lots of beautiful, handsome, smart and brave little witches and wizards here. You have that option.”

In truth, before the Christmas break, Harry had given almost no thought to what his post-Riddle life might be. The Dursleys had never talked about a future for him. As far as that went, the Professor really hadn’t either. The only two conversations that he could recall on that topic were his conversation with McGonagall that Umbridge had insisted on ruining and the few minutes that he and Hermione had joked about raising their own Quidditch team.

She asked, “Snogging Hermione aside, what has given you pleasure or satisfaction over the years?”

Harry thought about it as they walked. After a minute he replied, “This week, playing quidditch, helping the other orphans, playing golf, the DA, and helping Fred and George.”

She looked at him carefully and asked, “So you don’t aspire to be ruler of the world?”

Without a moment’s hesitation he replied, “Nope.”

“Minister of Magic?”

“No, but Hermione might be great at that.”

Diane was skilled at not getting off track. She asked, “General of the Aurors?”

Harry looked at her sadly and replied, "I would prefer that there was no need for a general of the Aurors."

"Me too. You could be a great professor or headmaster at the wizarding school." She wanted to find something that he would admit to looking forward to.

"It might be a hard place to raise children."

She found it, but shelved the information for a moment replying, "Maybe. Where did your friends Ron and Ginny go to school before Hogwarts?"

"I think they were home schooled."

"So after seven years of wizarding school, who would you say is best prepared for life, you or someone who was home schooled?"

"Definitely someone who went to a school with nonmagical kids. I can do magic but Mr. Weasley can barely turn on a light switch. The wizarding world went to such lengths to isolate itself. It's like they missed the last hundred years."

"Tell me about helping Fred and George."

"They always wanted to open a joke shop. I gave them the money to start it. They've done really well for themselves. They insisted on giving me a ten percent interest in their shop."

"You invited all of the orphans over for the holiday. How come?"

"The castle is a lonely place to spend Christmas. Professor Dumbledore did his best to make it fun, but..."

"Anderson seemed to have enjoyed spending time at your home. Jack and I certainly did. You certainly can find a meaningful life after Hogwarts and after Voldemort, Harry."

There was a silence for almost a minute. It might have been uncomfortable except for the gentle sound of the ocean water rolling

against the sand. Diane said, "Em told me that you purposely spent your way into a solution with the Gladiators. Can you do the same with Voldemort?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"It seems like he did most of his dirty work fighting lopsided fights. Maybe it's time to turn the tables on him."

"But the prophecy..."

She cut him off before he could start. "Maybe the prophecy meant that you would finish him off, not fight him alone. Dan told me that your Order and the Ministry have been systematically eliminating his resources and supporters. If I understand the soul splitting theory, you took away that protection, but he may not even know it yet. Maybe you need to get him in a situation where it's ten to one or a hundred or a thousand to one. Harry what I'm trying to say is Hermione needs a husband to give her those babies, not the memory of having been loved by a martyr. You have a life worth living and people worth living it with. Do what you need to do and come back here for weekends, winters or the rest of your life. You are without question the bravest man that I've ever met or even heard of. Please don't prove it again by getting killed."

There were tears in her eyes. As they walked along the waterline Harry heard her sob and held her for a minute. After a bit she smiled at him and said, "Hugs are good. Thanks."

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Mahogany Run is one of those courses that would be quite ordinary if you disregarded the billion-dollar view. Its narrow fairways favored Harry's strategy of leaving the woods in the bag and teeing off with his 2 iron.

Jack had a very different style than Dan or Harry. He took his driver out on each hole intent on getting a 300 yard shot. Unfortunately he only played his second shot from the fairway on a small handful of holes. He was paired with Bob Sunset who had played a half dozen

times in his twenty-four years. They had the opportunity to see other parts of the course than Dan and Harry. Bob's problem was that for half of the holes there was ocean on the left side of the fairway and he invariably hit way to the right rather than just a straight easy shot. Fortunately there were no snakes in the long grass of the rough.

Dan played each hole carefully, preferring to play from the fairway than the rough even at the cost of 30 yards off of his tee shot.

They talked as they played. Dan winked at Harry and asked him if he owned this course too.

Harry thought about it for a moment and realized that Dan was joking. He replied. "No thanks. We'd lose too many balls on this one."

Dan replied, "True, but you could come by at night, do one of those summoning charms for all of the lost balls, resell them and make a bundle."

They laughed together, then Dan smiled and asked, "How's the new putter?"

Harry replied, "Nice. It has a good feel to it. Thanks again."

Dan looked at the Scotty Cameron blade putter and replied, "It has a brass face for a really soft feel. I think you'll do well with it." He suspected that Harry was too inexperienced to realize that he'd been given a world-class putter, but was happy that his young friend liked it.

Bob and Jack seemed to enjoy each other's company. They talked about investigative techniques, surveillance and the inevitability of paperwork. Eventually they got around to discussing body armor. Dan surprised Jack by saying that almost everyone who had come owned and regularly wore body armor. Surprised at Dan's words, Jack replied, "Kevlar armor isn't sold to the general public in Britain. It would be as unusual as a citizen receiving a pistol permit."

Harry smiled and said, "We use dragon hide and I believe that Dr. Granger received a permit for his pistol. I have one for mine." It was

evident that Diane had relayed only the barest of details of the last few months to her husband.

Sunset looked at Jack and replied, "I don't have either one. I'm just a regular Auror. I've only faced the Death Eaters once and I didn't do as well as the others."

Jack pointed out, "You faced your enemy and lived to talk about it. There's a lot to be said about that."

Sunset shook his head and replied, "I'm just an ordinary bloke. Mr. Potter over there saved my arse that night at the wedding last summer... He saved almost everyone that night. He was awarded the Order of Merlin for another battle a few weeks later. He and a handful of others saved an entire village that night. He and Alyx and Master Auror Moody are the stuff of legends at Auror Headquarters. Last summer he caught two Death Eaters at Gringotts bank single-handed, right in the middle of the flipping lobby. That Death Eater would have made mince pie out of me. Mr. Potter took him down like it was nothing and recovered millions in Voldemort's gold stash to boot. He's that good."

They continued discussing surveillance, their comparative justice systems, losing balls on nearly every hole and having fun.

Meanwhile Harry and Dan were having as much fun as possible. "Thanks for setting up the tee time, Dan. This is a really great day to be out playing."

Dan nodded, and replied, "I've had fun playing the game my entire life, but I've come to the conclusion that it's not the course or the sticks that make it a fun outing, it's finding the right partner. We're a good match Harry." As Bob and Jack putted out, Dan said, "Let's go in. I'll buy the first round."

After an hour they met up with the women who had been shopping and took the ferry back to Tortola. All in all, everyone had a fantastic day.

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New Year's Eve was fun. Everyone went into town. They had a nice dinner then went to one of the clubs that had a large outdoor deck overlooking the ocean. The house band played a delightful mix of steel drum, reggae, and other Caribbean sounds. They danced to the music for hours. Tonks pulled Harry up for a long song and they had a chance to visit for a few minutes.

"Thanks again Harry. This is a great place to come and visit. Remus and I can't thank you enough for all of the wonderful things that you've done for us."

Harry replied, "Nothing needs to be said. I'm glad that you two are enjoying your stay. Is the guest house OK?"

"Brilliant. It's the best. Thanks again."

... --- ...

After another dance Harry took Hermione's hand and they excused themselves, saying that they would get back to the villa on their own. Harry took Hermione down to the deserted beach, pulled out his wand and disillusioned them.

"What are you up to Mr. Potter?" asked Hermione. A moment later she felt Harry place her small hands along the sides of his broomstick, which he had taken out of his pocket and enlarged.

"Climb on," said Harry softly. "I thought we could go for a moonlight fly along the beach."

She stiffened slightly and replied, "Harry, you know I don't like to..."

Harry wouldn't be thwarted and replied, "I'll go slow. Up. You get on behind me and hold on tight. We'll come back down when you want to."

"OK." She carefully put her leg over the polished pole, adjusted herself on the cushioning charm seat, held on tightly and said, "OK."

She wrapped her arms around him and hugged herself to his back as he kicked off. Eventually her nervousness eased. Holding onto the man she loved, she felt safe and contented. She remembered back to the first time she had flown with him, on Buckbeak, and the funny feeling that had stirred in her stomach, making her aware that she felt more for him than just friendship. She smiled and relaxed as she reflected on how those initial feelings had matured into the love she felt for him now.

Harry rose to about two hundred feet and they slowly floated along the shore. On one side were the lights and sounds of the shops and restaurants. On the other there was the moonlight over the water and the sound of the surf. It was a beautiful blend. If Harry had been trying to seduce Hermione, his efforts were working. After a half hour she kissed his neck and with an urgent sound to her voice, demanded, "Fly us home Harry."

Twenty minutes later Emma, Dan and the Turnbolls came back to the villa. Emma thought that Hermione and Harry had returned, as the lights in the villa were on when they arrived. She was going to softly knock on their door to check on them when she heard, "Oh Harry. Yes."

Emma turned around, smiled to herself, went to her room, closed the door and smiled seductively at her husband. Deep down she was a happy woman.

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The days flew by far too quickly. Three rounds, several shopping trips and seven dinners later, it was time to leave the islands. They cleaned up everything, packed their bags and got back into the vans. Harry was glad that Hermione had brought their camera along. This had been the best two weeks of his life.

Realizing what he was thinking, Hermione whispered in his ear, "We'll finish this war and come back for as long as we need." In the seat behind them, Diane was sitting next to Emma. She turned to her best friend and smiled.

... --- ...

Twelve thousand miles away Ron Wilson woke slowly, the last vestiges of a dream slowly slipping away. He shook his head. That had been a strange one, like something out of Dungeons and Dragons. Even as he thought about it, the dream faded from memory. As he brought himself back to reality, he looked around, blinking at the unfamiliar room. He ran his hand through his ginger hair trying to clear his head. Gradually it came back to him. He was in Melbourne, about to start a new school. He had been in the Homestay housing program that the college had arranged for him until school had started. Today he would move into the boarding school for his last year.

Ron was determined to forget all about his previous life and start over. His parents had been killed in an auto accident in Britain when he was young, and he had grown up with his aunt and uncle and cousin, who barely tolerated him at best until they had been killed in an auto accident while drunk. The feeling had been mutual. Now he was finally on his own, starting a new life at a new school. He wasn't sure why he was so determined to forget his past, but it felt like the right thing to do.

He got up and got dressed, feeling great about all the new clothes his caseworker and he had picked up over the last few months. He hadn't ever been able to go shopping for new clothing while growing up, and it was a great feeling getting his very own things. He really liked his caseworker, a nice woman named Mrs. Newcombe. The family he had been staying with was nice, too. Melbourne seemed to be a pretty friendly city, and he was looking forward to meeting the other students today.

He had a nice breakfast with his host family, said goodbye, and Mrs. Newcombe drove him to the campus. After meeting with the dean, and putting his trunk away in his own dormitory room, he was taken to the common room to meet some students.

"G'day, mate," said a boy, walking forward extending his hand. "Brent Thompson."

"G'day, Ron Wilson," said Ron, shaking his hand. "I'm new here, just transferred in."

"No worries, let me show you around Scotch College," offered Brent. He saw Ron's eyes light up as he looked at a group of very pretty blonde girls standing off to the side, watching him with interest. "I think we'll start with some introductions. Ladies ..."

Ron happily followed Brent over to the others. This was going to work out just fine.

... --- ...

Term started on Monday January 5. Everyone arrived back at the castle Sunday about dinner time. The Grangers and Diane decided to go back to the castle too. Dan and Emma accepted McGonagall's request to fill in for the Muggle Studies professor who had been badly hurt in a Death Eater attack over the break. Diane believed that there was a lot of unfinished business with respect to helping kids affected by the war. After dinner, McGonagall asked Harry, Hermione, Anderson and Lisa to come up to her office.

They arrived and met with Diane, Tonks, John Thomas and Minister Abraxan.

Minister Abraxan handed Harry a formal ministry document and wished him a happy belated Christmas. She smiled as he opened it.

Harry read it twice and then looked up at her.

"When?" he asked. Hermione recognized the leader of the Order emerging.

"Three weeks ago. In Bucharest. Auror Tonks can tell you about it now that it will become public knowledge tomorrow," Abraxan told him.

"You knew?" Harry demanded. Tonks shrugged.

"I arrested him, Harry. I wasn't allowed to tell anyone. Not even you," Tonks said.

"No, she wasn't. The task required complete secrecy, Mr. Potter. It's a fact of life for officers of the law to have secrets. Even from their loved ones," Abraxan told him. Harry frowned not liking the thought of that.

"What is it, Harry?" Diane asked. She knew all about secrets. Jack was a Scotland Yard Inspector.

"It's a summons. My testimony has been requested in the matter of the Ministry of Magic verses Severus Snape," Harry told them. "Tomorrow morning at ten."

"Snape's been caught?" Hermione asked in shock.

"Auror Tonks didn't even hurt him when she brought him in. I was quite impressed by her restraint," Abraxan told them. She handed McGonagall thirty passes to attend the trial and told her, "I assume that you and most of your staff will insist on attending. Please pass them out appropriately. Harry please meet with Director Thomas at nine tomorrow morning. Spectators will need to be seated by nine in courtroom ten. The staff from the Department of Mysteries and the Aurors stationed here have volunteered to take over all of the classes tomorrow."

"Thank Merlin," Anderson said softly. Lisa, sitting next to him, put her hand on his shoulder. They looked at each other knowing that Snape had been instrumental in the murder of both sets of their parents. They had all died refusing to be recruited for Voldemort.

It was the best Christmas present either of them could have hoped for. In time maybe it would bring closure. They hoped anyway.

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Chapter 24

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January 4

The passes for the trial that Abraxan had given McGonagall caused quite a stir at Hogwarts. Every one of her staff members wanted to attend the trial. So did every student that had ever endured Snape's classes. In the end, Dan Granger made her decision easier.

At the emergency staff meeting she had called, the muggle had muttered something about the circus that the trial for someone named OJ had become. Then he pointed out that all of the staff could not leave. It would leave the castle undefended. Even with the Auror staff coming in to teach classes, it would be a bad idea. McGonagall agreed that only three of them could go to the trial.

The arguments began about who should go began instantly. McGonagall had finally cast a silencing charm on the whole staff and then gave them the glare that she usually reserved for misbehaving students.

She removed the charm after a few seconds but it had its effect.

Dan took out a piece of parchment and tore it into small pieces. He wrote something on each one and then stole McGonagall's hat and placed them in it. In the end Flitwick, Hagrid and Slughorn had drawn to go. McGonagall noted that the Grangers had not elected to draw.

"Good, that's settled. Dan you had something you wanted to discuss about the muggle studies classes?" McGonagall asked.

"It can wait. Which students will be going to the trial?" Dan asked. McGonagall knew he was asking if his daughter would be attending.

"Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, Lisa Turpin, Anderson Condor, both of the Greystone sisters..." McGonagall continued and there were no surprises on the list.

"That's only twenty people," Emma said with a slight frown. McGonagall nodded.

"I want Diane to go. The kids are going to need her. I think the remaining nine passes should be for a protective detail for them. I will talk to Mr. Potter about that," McGonagall said. She hesitated and then added, "I'm also canceling classes for the day. The wireless is broadcasting the trial live due to unprecedented interest."

Minerva asked Diane and the Grangers to stay after the others had left. She closed the door behind Poppy and Jonie arrived with a fresh tray of biscuits and tea. She sat down again and said, "Thank you for staying. I wanted to talk with you for a moment about your children." They collectively understood that she was referring to Hermione, Harry and to a lesser extent Susan.

McGonagall put her cup down and said, "I have no personal experience as a parent, but I have a lot of experience with children of their age. The law may recognize them as children one day and adults the next, but the reality is that they're seventeen and eighteen and circumstances have thrown the weight of the world on their shoulders. They have assumed and been assigned roles of soldier, general, healer, billionaire, strategist, as well as roles that traditionally have been reserved for the Directors of the Aurors and the Department of Mysteries. All the while, they're desperately trying to be young people who would like to develop a love and plot out a future together."

She continued. "I bring this up not out of disrespect for their behavior, which I regard as remarkable, rather to talk about their relationship with Severus Snape the ex-professor. Snape has a remarkable talent for verbal cruelty. Tomorrow may well be his last day on Earth, and I am certain that he will use his opportunity to say something particularly reprehensible toward your children."

Diane nodded in understanding and replied, "The worst lies are those that have an element of truth in them. Harry would be highly vulnerable to them."

Minerva agreed saying, "Unfortunately when he is hurting the most, it is his nature to assume the properties of a turtle, turn inward and simply reply that he's fine. I believe that these will be the hardest two or three months of their lives."

... --- ...

The night before the trial was to begin, Harry had a lot of trouble sleeping. The next morning he woke up in Hermione's arms after a night of nightmares. She had been awake half the night comforting him as he relived Dumbledore's murder.

The night had been bad but the morning was much better as her comforting turned into more. Hermione thought that Harry's touch had an almost desperate feel to it. It was the first time they had broken their promise not to take advantage of their status as Head Students.

January 5

The trip to the Ministry was quiet. Harry and Hermione decided to apparate separately because they knew that the reporters would be all over him. They were. Besides the Daily Prophet, Witch Weekly, and Teen Witch Weekly, Harry also saw the Detroit Wizarding Press, the Kiev Monthly Chronicle, the Iceland Informer and Malaysian Star Gazer.

Surprisingly enough they were just as interested in Hermione. They shouted questions at Harry about being the Chosen One. They asked her questions about Dan and what Hermione thought about the bounty on him. They asked deeply personal questions about the two of them that made Harry think of hexing them.

Off to the side of the pack of reporters stood one wizard who was doing nothing but watching. Harry nodded to Odd Lovegood, walked over and shook his hand. Hermione also shook his hand.

"How's my daughter?" Odd asked as if there weren't fifty other reporters throwing personal questions around.

"She's doing fine. We saw her at breakfast this morning," Harry said smiling at him. The crowd stopped speaking and listened.

"Good. I know you don't have time to talk right now. Tell Luna to send me an owl. You kids today, you would think writing a letter would cause your hand to fall off," Odd said.

"Yes sir," Hermione said with a slight smile. She knew that Luna owed her father quite often. He gave her a vague smile and winked.

They had been slowly making their way to the security entrance and managed to slip inside before the pack knew what happened. They stepped in line behind a tall black man and a much shorter white man.

"Hello Auror Shacklebolt," Hermione said politely. Kingsley turned and looked them over.

"Ah, hello Miss Granger. Mr. Potter," Shacklebolt said. He introduced his companion as a muggle national security liaison.

They chatted as they stood in line. Harry wasn't feeling too talkative. He was nervous about testifying. He didn't know what he would do if he screwed this up. Snape always had a way of messing with his mind.

Eventually they got to courtroom ten. Hermione went to find her seat. Harry went into a separate room for the witnesses, and talked briefly with Director Thomas. Until he testified, he would be in seclusion.

Hermione found Professor McGonagall with ease. She was surrounded by students wearing Hogwarts uniforms. The DA security detail that McGonagall and Harry had assigned was doing their jobs wonderfully. She saw the Cadets in the visitor section and nodded.

Hermione sat down as Minister Abraxan and the rest of the Wizengamot entered the room. Everyone sat quickly. The seat next to her was one of the few empty ones. It was reserved for Harry.

One of the assistants spoke. "I call to order the British Court of the Wizarding Ministry. The ruling Minister will be leading the

proceedings today in the matter of the Ministry of Magic verses Severus Snape. A warning for all; anyone causing a disturbance in the Court will be arrested for disorderly conduct. I present Minister Abraxan."

She looked around for room for a moment and said, "In the matter of the Ministry of Magic verses Severus Snape I call together the Wizarding Wizengamot to stand as jury in the pursuit of justice. What say you, Wizengamot?"

"Aye," forty-nine voices called back.

"Does anyone want to remove themselves in fear of not being impartial?" she asked. Not one sound was heard in the room. Then she requested that Snape be brought forth.

Snape looked, for lack of a better term, like shit. It was obvious he had been near a very large fire recently. The burns were visible to all. His normal sneer had been replaced by a thin-lipped grimace. He was limping and having trouble walking in the shackles.

Sympathy was in short supply.

"Mr. Snape, remain standing as the charges against you are read," Abraxan said firmly. Snape didn't have much choice. The two bulky aurors that were escorting him had his arms in vise-like grips. Abraxan continued, "Madame Chambers please read the charges."

"In the matter of the Ministry of Magic verses Severus Snape the charges are as follows;

Murder of magical persons – Albus Dumbledore, Janice Turpin, Andrew Turpin, Jacqueline Condor, Anderson Condor Senior, Amelia Bones and Emmaline Vance.

Conspiracy to commit murder against magical persons – Lily Potter, Frank Longbottom, Alice Longbottom, Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, Arthur Weasley, Molly Weasley, William Weasley, Charles..."

Hermione listened as a list of every current member of the Order of the Phoenix was read.

“Conspiracy to murder Aurors - James Potter, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Nymphadora Tonks-Lupin, Alastor Moody.

Murder of nonmagical persons - Peter Masterson and Sebastian Grant.

Manslaughter of nonmagical persons – Frank Trampion.

Conspiracy to commit murder against nonmagical persons – Daniel Granger, Emma Granger, Mary Renny, Michael Renny and Sean Waters.

Unauthorized use of Dementors

Use of unforgivable curses

Breaking the secrecy statutes

Use of magic on muggles

Robbery of muggles

Robbery of magicals

Conspiracy to help prisoners escape from Azkaban Prison

Aiding in the escape of prisoners from Azkaban Prison

Terrorist acts on the village of Hogsmeade with the intention of murder, rape, mayhem, torture, and theft

Terrorist acts on Hogwarts with the intention of murder, rape, mayhem, torture, and theft

Conspiracy to frame Sirius black for murder

Possession of Death Eater paraphernalia

Possession of and creation of illegal and restricted potions including Polyjuice, Veritaserum, Heartserum, Intestinal fire juice and Epidermis elimination.”

Madame Chambers finished and silence descended in the room. Then Abraxan asked how Snape would plead. His barrister, Jonnie Cockroach stared straight ahead and answered.

“To all of the charges but one my client pleads... guilty,” the shifty looking man said.

The whole crowd gasped and burst out talking. Abraxan called for quiet.

“Which charge does Mr. Snape refute?” She asked. It took a lot to surprise the high priestess but Snape had done it.

“The conspiracy to commit murder against a magical person in the case of Lily Potter. My client has a statement he wishes to make before you pass judgement,” Mr. Cockroach told her firmly.

“Very well. The witnesses in this case may be allowed into the court room,” Abraxan said.

Harry looked at Hermione puzzled as he sat down next to her. He leaned close to her and asked, “What happened?”

“He pleaded guilty,” Hermione murmured, stunned.

“Mr. Snape you may make your statement now.”

“I can give you many reasons for why I have chosen the path that I ended up on. But I did not choose my path. Both circumstance and my parents set it for me. My mother was a blood-traitor. My childhood was unpleasant at best and brutal at worst,” Snape said. He was wrapped up in the magical chains that seemed to tighten themselves more with every sentence.

Harry snorted and growled in a low voice, “Join the bloody club.”

“While at school I was tormented by my classmates much like my father tormented me. I was happy to join the Dark Lord in his quest for purity. I joined him as he promised to cleanse my blood and make me pure, such as he has done for himself,” he paused having chosen his words carefully.

Snape continued, “The Dark Lord does things in his own time and I do not question why the rituals to purify my blood have not been preformed. I can speculate that the reasons begin and end on October 31, 1981. In June of 1980 I overheard a prophecy that I knew would grant me all that I yearned for. It spoke of a child that would be born that would vanquish the Dark Lord. I informed my master of the threat and we conspired to eliminate the child before it could grow powerful enough to defeat my master.”

Minerva bit her lip as her former colleague described years of duplicity.

“I joined the Order of the Phoenix under the guise of being a spy for Dumbledore. I was actually a spy for the Dark Lord. I discovered that two children fit the prophecy. Neville Longbottom and Harry Potter. I informed my master of this and he rewarded me by allowing me to have the Potter mudblood as my own after he killed James and Harry Potter,” Snape said as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Harry looked as if he was going to get sick. Hermione put her hand on his shoulder but he pulled away.

“I was the one who turned Peter Pettigrew to the noble cause of my lord. I chose him because he was the weakest link in the Order of the Phoenix. He didn’t want to join me but I left him little choice. Serve or die. He chose to betray his friends and live. I didn’t know he was the secret keeper for the Potters. It was just happenstance.”

Hagrid wanted to stand up and snap Snape in two. He clenched his fists as Snape continued.

“Lily Potter was to be my prize. I knew that after she and I were purified together she would be mine forever. Then she threw herself

in front of a killing curse meant for her obnoxious little brat. She had always been the best witch at charm work that I have ever seen. I shouldn't have been surprised that she found the charm that would protect her son from the killing curse."

Remus exerted every ounce of self-control that he possessed to keep from killing Snape as he spoke.

"You idiots who think Harry Potter is going to save you are sadly mistaken. He didn't defeat the Dark Lord in October 1981. His mother did. Lily Potter was not to die that night. It was her choice to step in front of the curse. The only good thing to come of that night was the imprisonment of Sirius Black. He attempted to murder me while we were in school and he finally paid for his crimes," Snape finished.

Absolute silence reigned until there was a commotion in the crowd. Snape looked around. The Potter brat was saying something to his mudblood whore.

"Potter!" Snape snarled loudly. Potter stopped his movements but didn't look up. The Granger bitch did though. "You will never defeat the Dark Lord. Your mother was delicious." Severus yelled at him.

Harry looked up slowly. Snape could tell that he had gotten to the brat. Potter's buttons were so easy to push. He would never be certain that he hadn't lied.

Harry spoke in an amazingly controlled voice. "Every person I have spoken to that knew my mother tells me what a kind and decent person she was. Your delusions that she would be yours are ludicrous. She jumped in front of that curse to save me. That is a power your Dark Lord knows not. There are a lot of things your master doesn't know Snape."

Snape didn't argue. He sneered at Potter again and then noticed the look in his eyes. Snape shivered.

Abraxan looked at Snape with hard eyes and demanded, "Is there anything else you wish to confess to?"

It was a glib question and she didn't expect an answer, but she got one. Snape laughed loudly.

"You are all fools. You should be praying to Merlin for the Dark Lord's mercy when he comes for you. I can assure you it will do you no good! Your precious Potter can't save you. His ugly mudblood whore can't satisfy him. She's never had an original thought in her life. There are no books on defeating a Dark Lord."

Shouting broke out and people began screaming for Snape's head. The room was almost in chaos when Abraxan shouted for silence. Snape laughed the whole time.

"What are you going to do when the Dark Lord comes for you?" he asked Abraxan. Then he sat up straighter. He shouted, "Long live my master, the Dark Lord!"

Harry stood up and slowly walked toward the exit. He had to get out of here or he would murder Snape himself. Hermione followed him.

Abraxan adjured the Wizengamot to discuss punishment. They left for a private room.

Snape sneered at the crowd as his punishment was being discussed. It was not a matter of if he would die. It was a matter of when. The magical chains binding him continued tightening.

He had been questioned under Veritaserum for four hours a day since his capture. He had given up nothing, as the idiots at the ministry didn't even know the proper questions to ask.

He watched as Marjorie Chambers, an imbecile that he remembered well from potions class left the Wizengamot debating room. She searched the crowd until she found Minerva McGonagall.

'Speaking of imbeciles,' Snape thought.

'Minerva was an idiot.' Snape had witnessed her blind faith in Dumbledore. She and the rest of the Order of the Phoenix were all

foolhardy. They all put their faith in Albus Dumbledore who in turn put his faith in a mere boy.

‘That irritating, irresponsible, reckless snot was as awful as his dead father. They were cut from the same urine stained cloth.’

Severus, to this day, had trouble believing that his Lily had sacrificed her self for that worthless brat. As he waited for the Wizengamot to return, he thought about Lily Evans. She had been so kind to him in the beginning. However, in the end she had made her decision. She had chosen James Potter.

Abraxan entered the room followed by the rest of the members of the Wizengamot. Lily had made her choice and Severus had made his. He would face this like a man.

“In the history of this court suspects have typically plead guilty in order to beg for the courts mercy. I must admit Mr. Snape you surprised me. You pled guilty knowing what your fate would be. You have perpetrated crimes against the human race - muggle and magical alike. You deserve the punishment that you are about to receive.”

Snape stopped smirking. ‘She was up to something.’

“You mentioned a purifying ritual several time, Mr. Snape. It was suggested by several members of the Wizengamot that we use a new process that the American Wizarding CIA has developed. It would strip you of your magic and leave you nothing more than a muggle. You are wanted by the muggle authorities for manslaughter and robbery. You could your spend years in a muggle jail. I doubt you would survive the experience.”

No! Snape thought. ‘That would be too cruel. Me the greatest Potions Master of all time reduced to a muggle?’

“However, doing that would set a precedence of not executing Death Eaters. That is a dangerous road to start down and not one that the Ministry is willing to consider at this time,” Abraxan continued.

'Of course. You wouldn't want to be seen as weak now would you?' Snape thought as he sneered again.

"It is the opinion of this jury that you deserve death. However, before you are executed you will have your memories of all Death Eater activity and interaction with the Dark Lord removed from your mind." Snape began to feel dizzy as she spoke.

"It has never been disputed that your knowledge of potions is unparalleled. That said, we will also be removing all of your knowledge of potions and store it in a pensieve that will become available to all students so that your abysmal performance as a potions professor can be reversed." Snape seethed with anger, but said nothing as she continued.

"Your execution time will be set after the Department of Mysteries is through with you. That is of course dependant on if there is anything left of you to execute. Court is adjourned," Abraxan said. She banged her gavel on the bench and rose to leave.

The crowd watched and jeered at him as Snape forgot his pledge to face his punishment like a man. He was crying like a baby when the Aurors drug him from the courtroom.

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Back at Hogwarts students were hi-fiving each other as if Christmas had come early. Poppy, Dan and Emma silently went back to their rooms. Having the Ministry take this awful man's life wouldn't repair things for the hundreds of individuals who he had stained.

They awaited the return of those that they loved and cared for.

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January 8

Three days later Hermione was at her wits end. Harry had curled inside himself emotionally. She didn't ask him to talk about it. She

tried not to push. Instead she just let him know that she would be there for him.

So far Harry had done everything in his power to avoid the subject of Severus Snape. When a debate about his fate had begun at the dinner table he had left without a word. Later that night he had started a fight with Hermione.

She knew that he was venting his frustrations and fears on her but she didn't know how to avoid it. She refused to fight with him over trivial things.

For the first time in months he was sleeping in his own room. That bothered Hermione a lot. Not only because he was shutting himself off but also because she needed him. He didn't seem to realize it and she didn't want to be selfish. She could lose a little sleep to bad dreams if it gave him the time to work out what ever was going on in his head.

This morning there was an editorial in The Daily Prophet.

Cruel and Unusual Punishment

By Reggie McDonald

Earlier this week the Wizengamot in its infinite wisdom almost made a heinous mistake in delivering justice. It was suggested by two members of the Wizengamot that Severus Snape be stripped of his magic and sent into the muggle world to be put on trial for crimes committed against some muggles.

To remove someone's magic and let them retain their memory is a horrible punishment that even outweighs death. How would he live? How could he survive?

Turning a pureblood wizard into a muggle and sending them to live in the muggle world is sentencing them to a life of horror. Without their magic they would not be able to find work, move from location to location or even cook food.

True this punishment was inflicted on Ronald Weasley after he was convicted of accidentally killing the director of magical law enforcement. Allegedly he was given the memories of a muggle and a large sum of cash. The money was rumored to have been contributed by Harry Potter. Ronald Weasley was given a chance at a new life when he should have been thrown through the veil.

Severus Snape was going to be sent to a muggle prison. What horrors could await him there? He would have no knowledge of the way of life or no way of defending himself from muggle criminals.

Sentencing him to life as a muggle would be a travesty.

The article received many reactions.

Hermione was furious. She had adjusted and was still adjusting to life as a witch with very little help from anyone. No one had told her about the floo system, house elves or the insane pureblood prejudices before she came to Hogwarts. She thought that she had adjusted pretty well.

Dan, Emma and Diane were all extremely insulted. The editorial made it sound as if being a muggle were a hardship to be endured and that they were lucky they even knew how to breathe. Dan was especially aggravated. He had risked his life to help in the fight. Several members of the Wizengamot thought that turning criminals into what he was could be used as a punishment worse than death.

Molly had never been so angry in her life. Ron had been given a punishment that the Wizengamot thought worse than death. The Daily Prophet said it was too harsh for a confessed mass murderer. When Fred and George had said something about paying Reggie McDonald a visit, she had kissed them each on the cheek and left the room.

Harry read the article and the paper had burst into flames. After storming out of the great hall he had literally vanished. Hermione retrieved the Marauders Map and found him sitting in the cold, by the lake, under his invisibility cloak.

When she approached him he took off the cloak and glared at her.

"What do you want?" he snapped.

"I was worried..."

"Don't be. I just want to be alone," he told her.

"You don't have to deal with this by yourself Harry," she said. He scowled and threw a rock into the lake. It bounced around the ice chips and finally found water to sink in.

"You don't understand," he snapped at her.

"No, I don't, but I understand you're hurting," she told him.

"You don't understand anything. Both of your parents are alive. You don't have to wonder what they were like," he said roughly.

"That doesn't mean I can't sympathize with you," she said frowning.

"I don't want your sympathy," he said in a sneer that Snape would have loved to have possessed. She flinched and he looked almost satisfied.

"I love you, Harry," she said not knowing what else to say.

"Please, I just want to be alone right now," he said turning back to the lake.

She stood there for a moment collecting herself and then tossed the map at his feet.

"If you need me you know how to find me," she said. She turned away before the tears started. He didn't notice how upset she was. She was hurting too and needed him but knew that he had to work through his demons first. She went to find Diane.

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January 9

Susan frowned as she listened to the younger Hufflepuffs talk about Harry and Hermione. The rumors about them breaking up were growing like a baby hippogriff. She was about to tell them off when Hermione entered the great hall. Harry was five steps behind her.

Neither of them looked particularly happy but that had been the case since Snape's trial. She had spoken to her adopted sister about it. Hermione's tears had come quick. Like most of the students Susan had at one time thought that the Head Girl was a solid brick that never let her emotions overwhelm her. She knew better now but the intensity behind Hermione's breakdown had surprised Susan.

The younger girls were watching them closely for signs. The only signal that got was when Harry helped Hermione into her seat he kissed the back of her hand making her giggle. Susan watched all of their faces fall and she smiled.

At the Professor's table Emma and Diane had observed them too. They kept watching and noticed that Harry and Hermione were not talking to each other. They were not talking at all. Individually they were falling apart under the stress.

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January 10

Dan and Emma's meeting with McGonagall about the muggle studies course work had been enlightening to say the least. She had been shocked at their statements about the textbook being a history book not a guide to modern muggle life. Emma pointed out the things that it didn't include, like the gasoline engine, automobile, jetliners, computers, electricity or the concept of technology.

Dan was stunned into silence when McGonagall had asked if electricity was important in a muggle home.

"We thought that maybe a fieldtrip to a muggle home would be in order for the pureblood students in our classes. Then we realized that

so very few of them take muggle studies. Those who do are left with the impression that modern day muggles are all using spinning machines and are ironworkers or are cotton farmers. They have no idea of the muggle world. It is no wonder that there is a huge divide in the muggleborn and pureblood communities,” Emma explained.

“We propose that we teach the muggle studies classes as they are but as history. We know that the course cannot change this year. OWL and NEWT exams are based on the current text. However, in addition to the class we would like to hold a few seminars on modern muggle life for the whole school. These kids need to know what the muggle world is really like,” Dan said.

“I don’t think that the Board of Governors would approve of such a thing, but you are welcome to present your ideas,” McGonagall said with a frown. The idea was sound but it would never pass.

“We would like to hold the first seminar with the current pureblood students in our classes. There are five of them. We would like to invite the Board of Governors and the ministry examining board to the seminar. They need to see why the courses should be changed,” Emma said.

McGonagall agreed and that was how a group of pureblood wizards ended up at a muggle house. Hermione and Harry had gone along for the portkey trip.

The pureblood students were Anderson Condor and his Slytherin friend Buford Dandy, Susan Bones, Lisa Turpin and a nearly mute third year named Jennifer Youngstaff. Jennifer was intimidated by the older teens and before Dan and Emma had never met a muggle before.

The Greystones lived in a nice home not far from the Granger’s burnt out home in Crawley. All three of the Grangers instantly recognized the street that they were on but none of them mentioned it. Andrea Greystone had agreed to let them use her home as a demonstration site. Both of her girls were in the class and were allowed to come with the group.

Mrs. Greystone had been astounded when nine students, two professors, five members of the board of Governors and three members of the Ministry of Magic had appeared in her back yard. Dan Granger instantly took charge.

He asked his daughter to conjure something for three fourths of the people to sit on. She threw up a warming charm around the group and conjured some patio furniture. Allie and Katlyn both hugged their mum and then grinned at her expression.

"Didn't know what you were getting into did you?" Allie asked. Mrs. Greystone kissed her daughter's forehead.

Dan and Emma spoke briefly to Mrs. Greystone and then requested the adults all join them for a tour of the house. Harry went inside with them while Hermione remained outside.

"Did you live in a house like this Hermione?" Anderson Condor asked her.

"Almost exactly like this one. See that part of the house over there? It's an expansion to the rest of the house. They must have used the same architect my parents did," she mused.

The group sat quietly occasionally talking about school or their own homes.

After about an hour the group in the house came out. The adults looked shell shocked. Dan was smirking. Hermione recognized it as his I was so right look.

"Dr. Granger you have my permission to change the course anyway you see fit. You have approval for the seminars that you outlined. We cannot do anything about the exams for this year but next year they will be written to the class you teach," Madame Marchbanks told them. Every member of the board of Governors agreed. They took a portkey to the Ministry of Magic.

"You'd think they had never seen a telly before," Allie commented.

"They probably haven't," Dan told her. He nodded to the rest of the kids and motioned them to go into the house.

They spent the next hour looking over all things muggle. Anderson had seen some of it from being at number twelve. Arthur Weasley had let him borrow a couple of the books that he had gotten for Christmas too. Susan, having spent the greater part of the summer with the Granger's and Alyx had discovered that muggle technology was fascinating and intimidating. The other three were astounded at what they saw.

Emma described the television and how it worked. She explained the different types of shows and channels and the idea of mass communication. She mentioned that the Greystone's had a cable system that allowed them many different channels. Dan showed them the VCR and the DVD player.

Then they demonstrated the telephone. Dan told them that Harry could call his aunt who was living in the states and speak to her as if she were standing in the room. Skepticism reigned so Emma offered to call Diane who was in her office. Each of the kids knew Dr. Diane and was amazed when they spoke to her. Hermione apparated Anderson to Diane's office and let him speak to one of the other kids from Diane's end.

Harry offered to call his Aunt in the States on his cell phone. The kids were amazed that he had a portable communication device that allowed him to call any muggle phone at any time.

"Most muggles have a telephone in their house. A lot are using the cellular telephones like Harry has. Dr. Emma, Hermione and I all have one. Dr. Diane has two. One for work and one for her personal use," Dan told the group.

"Allie and I share one when we are home during the summer. We're usually together so it's not a problem. Muggle parents use them as a leash. Mum and Dad can call and check on what we are doing and who we are with at anytime," Katlyn said.

They moved on to the kitchen and amazed the kids with the microwave and then the ice dispenser on the icebox. After Allie made some microwave popcorn and everyone had some they all washed their hands and moved on to the den.

Dan demonstrated e-mail and the Internet. He sent Jack an e-mail asking him if he were coming to the Warlock Awards that minister Abraxan had insisted on holding. A few minutes later Jack replied that he wouldn't miss it. He also asked Dan to tell McGonagall thanks for letting his wife return home three nights a week.

The Greystone sisters showed off their bedrooms but refused to open their brother's door.

"The little snot can do accidental magic on purpose," Allie explained. She continued looking at the door warily, "The door is warded."

"Really?" Hermione asked, impressed.

"Oh yes. The girls were pretty easy but Brian regularly blows things up. I think it's a boy thing," Mrs. Greystone told them. Emma chuckled.

"You wouldn't believe some of the accidental magic that Hermione did when she was little. Or I suppose you would," Dan told her. She nodded.

"Isn't it kinda weird how muggleborns run in families?" Anderson asked.

"You calling me weird, twerp?" Allie asked. She was grinning at him and he stuck his tongue out at her. Katlyn rolled her eyes.

"You're no weirder than usual Al," Anderson answered.

They returned to the dining room where Mrs. Greystone told her daughters to set up the table with the leaf and extra chairs. Allie wanted to use magic but in the spirit of being in Muggle Studies they didn't. Harry had to conjure a couple extra chairs anyway.

Mrs. Greystone answered questions from the kids and then had a few of her own.

"You said it was weird that muggleborns ran in this family. Is that an unusual occurrence?"

"Not really. The Creevy's had three magical children," Hermione answered.

"I only remember two Creevys," Buford told them. He was a fifth year Slytherin who had taken the class for an easy O.

"Colin and Dennis had a younger sister named Rebecca. She would have started school next year," Hermione said quietly.

"I didn't know that," Harry said. Hermione saw him flinch slightly and took his hand. She gave it a quick squeeze but then he dropped it and moved away from her.

"Ginny told me that Rebecca was even more hyper than her brothers, if you can imagine that," Anderson told them. They were quiet for a moment and then Jennifer laughed softly.

"Can you imagine the look on Professor McGonagall's face if she'd had three Creevys at the same time?" She asked.

"Merlin, Gryffindor tower might have fallen from all the bouncing," Lisa said.

"Oh, I don't know. There were five Weasley's at the same time and nothing too bad happened," Hermione said fondly.

"Oh, easy for you to say. Ginny and Ron were your friends, Percy respected you and Fred and George are afraid of you," Allie told her.

"Which wheeze did they get you with?" Hermione asked knowingly.

"The stupid canary one," Allie answered.

"Four times," Katlyn qualified, snorting with laughter

Dan offered to demonstrate the best function of a telephone. He called and ordered pizza for delivery. Anderson smiled widely and looked at his Slytherin friend, "Wait until you taste this muggle food. It is almost as good as the chocolate mouse my Mum used to make."

The kids continued to talk and Mrs. Greystone started a soft conversation with Emma. She mentioned that there was a lot of past tense in their remarks about their friends. Emma nodded sadly and explained that the war was really taking a toll. She had noticed that Harry, for the most part, had been in a decent spirit today. Hermione had told her about his mood swings but she really had not seen it herself.

Brian Greystone arrived home just after the pizza had arrived. He had a black eye and a busted lip and a chip on his shoulder.

"Another fight?" Mrs. Greystone asked in resignation. Brian scowled.

Hermione offered to heal his bruises with magic. Mrs. Greystone watched in fascination as the wounds healed. Hermione also gave the boy a short lecture on the art of the right hook.

"Hermione Jane Granger!" Emma said as Hermione told him the secret of getting his opponent down. Alyx had taught her a lot.

"Oh please. Would you rather he turn the little snot into a hot air balloon? Maybe make his hair turn green?" Hermione said. She had put up with bullies the whole time she was at a muggle school. She knew that it wouldn't stop but giving Brian a way to defend himself could stop him from doing worse with magic.

"Did you do those things when you were young?" Anderson asked with awe in his voice.

"The hair thing yes. Harry blew someone up once," Hermione said examining her handiwork on Brian.

"Totally chill, no way. How?" Brian asked.

"I don't know. She irritated me by saying some nasty things and the next thing I knew I was on the Knight Bus running away from my uncle who was not amused," Harry answered.

"What else did you do?" Brian asked Harry and Hermione.

"Yeah Miss Head Girl and Mr. Head Boy, what other out of school illegal magic did you do?" Lisa asked.

"I drove away some dementors once, apparated to the school roof when a bunch of bullies were chasing me and I did the hair thing once too. It just looked better blue," Harry said.

"I was a perfect child. I never made anyone's pants refuse to stay up, never made anyone's text book bite them, nor did I curse my father's golf clubs," Hermione said, winking. Emma snickered and Harry said, "Ouch."

"Took a month for it to wear off," Dan told them. He realized that most of the kids didn't know what golf clubs were.

"I never even considered doing that," Brian mused. His mother gave him a look and the boy smiled innocently.

"Golf club? Isn't that what Dr. Dan got you for Christmas?" Anderson asked Harry.

"That's a putter. Just one club. I think we should give lessons," Dan told Harry.

"Anderson would cheat and use magic on the ball," Harry said with a smile that wasn't all there.

"I would not! Okay, so I probably would," Anderson admitted. The others kidded him about cheating at Quidditch. Buford rationalized that it was a house tradition.

"Do all muggle born kids have so much trouble in muggle schools?" Mrs. Greystone asked looking at her son.

"I believe so. One of the Auror Cadets at school told me that everyone she knew had stories that would make you cry. It's hard to fit in when you know you are different," Harry replied.

"Alyx is a wise woman. You should listen to her," Emma told him.

"How did you know it was Alyx?" Harry asked.

"She's the only female Auror Cadet and she told me the same thing last summer. Fascinating lady," Emma told him.

"Gorgeous lady," Anderson said.

Anderson and Buford both sighed. Hermione rolled her eyes and gave Susan a sympathetic look. The breakup had been mutual and they were still close friends. Hermione knew how much Susan was hurting though.

The rest of the afternoon they enjoyed their pizza and had fun learning about each other.

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January 11

Minster Abraxan had insisted that something be done for the defenders of the castle. She thought that the wizarding world needed something positive. While it was true, the leaders of said defense wanted little to do with it.

Emma Granger and Pomona Sprout ended up arranging most of the celebration by default. A feast was the most plausible solution and the best location was of course the great hall at Hogwarts.

Many ministry officials and parents wanted to attend. It was a logistics nightmare until Sprout approached McGonagall about getting portkeys set up for the parents.

Once again Harry and Hermione were transporting groups of people from Hogsmeade Station to the castle. The muggle parents were

especially impressed because the castle would suddenly appear when they entered inside the wards.

Harry thought that it was a terrible idea and had the Order and the DA all on duty. After the third trip to Hogsmeade he decided to stay at the station and watch for trouble. Hermione thought that he was shirking his duty but bit her tongue. She had been doing a lot of that lately.

"In the year 1732 a young man named Montello McGee saved a village from destruction. He single handedly defeated nine trolls that were intent on destroying the village of Godric's Hollow. The details of his story are told as a bedtime story to children and I am sure you all know it," Abraxan began. She frowned and looked at the text of her speech.

"Apparently my speech writer forgot whom I was to be speaking to this evening," she said to the crowd that contained many muggle parents.

She told the story and both Harry and Hermione felt themselves smiling a bit sadly. McGee had levitated their clubs and used them against the trolls. Hermione caught Professor McGonagall's eye and saw the question in them. She nodded and McGonagall chuckled softly.

Abraxan expounded on the first recipient of the British Warlock award and then on its meaning. Harry tuned her out for a while and scanned the room looking for something but not sure what. Hermione poked him when he needed to pay attention.

"...ers of this castle on Halloween night are all heroes. They risked themselves to protect the younger children and the castle. Many of you were injured that night. You have all healed and are stronger for the experience."

She continued. "There are no classes to this award. You are all equal in your bravery and your values. I am not going to name the recipients of the award tonight. A list will be published when the danger of retribution has passed. I will however say that the youngest recipient ever of this award is in this room tonight. Before tonight a

nonmagical person had never received the Warlock Award either. Tonight three of them will be given the honor. The defenders of the castle were a diverse group that worked together as one and overcame obstacles that would have left most of us dead.” Abraxan said. She kept talking for a while longer and Harry tuned her out again.

After the awards appeared in front of the recipients and three other people had spoken it was time for dinner.

Seating for the dinner was assigned. Emma and Sprout made sure to put one ministry official and one set of parents at each section of the tables. Minister Abraxan sat with the Professors. Harry and Hermione were also at the head table.

Knowing how much work Emma and Sprout had put into the night was the only reason that Dan, Harry and Hermione showed up.

Harry was still in his mood and didn’t want to get out of it. He was finding it comfortable and familiar. He and Dan golfed in the room of requirements occasionally. They didn’t have conversations of depth though. He would use the room to fly also, but always alone. He managed a pretty good public face but Hermione was driving him crazy sometimes. He didn’t like fighting with her but she was closest to him and was bearing the brunt of his anger.

Hermione was irritated and not just with her angry and uncommunicative boyfriend. Everything seemed to be getting on her nerves lately. Her period had been two days late. She had realized it when she had gone to see Poppy for the fatigue that she was feeling. The lecture that she had to endure from Madame Pomfrey about taking better care of herself was not something that Hermione cared to ever repeat. The negative pregnancy test had done a lot for her frayed nerves.

Dan was still disgusted about the Wizengamot decisions and made it a point to not talk to anyone from the ministry. He hoped that changing the muggle studies classes would help bridge the divide. Tonight he felt like he was in the zoo as many of the pureblood

parents and Wizengamot members were staring at his family. He mentioned this to Harry and young man snorted.

“Welcome to my life,” said the green-eyed wizard.

Professor McGonagall stood and the room fell silent. “I have something I would like to add to Minister Abraxan, Mr. Jasper and Mrs. Marchbank’s words. I am extremely proud of each and every one of you. You younger children followed your prefects and kept calm when the world around you was falling apart. The young men and women who stepped up and volunteered to defend the castle showed a resolve against the dark forces that Albus Dumbledore would have cried tears of joy to see. In his honor I have four more words for you - Let the feast begin,” she said with the wave of her hand. It was not quite as impressive when you knew that the wave of her hand was merely a magical signal to the house elves. Harry and Hermione both knew the secret and were amused at the gasp from the crowd.

“What do you say to you and I catching the next portkey to St Thomas and playing golf for a week?” Dan asked. He was scanning the crowd as he ate. People were being rude and some were even pointing at them.

“Brilliant, make it a month. Too bad our women would kill us,” Harry answered.

Hermione, who was listening to the conversation, didn’t comment. She picked at her food and pushed it around her plate. A flask of a potion vitamin supplement appeared next to her plate and she glared at it. She was on the supplement until her strength was back to normal.

“They could come along. Hermione knows how to caddy, don’t you, love?” Dan said. His daughter picked up the flask and glared at him. After muttering under her breath what they could do with their golf clubs she excused herself and left the table.

“What in the world did you say to her?” Emma hissed at the snickering men.

"Don't worry about it dear. I think our daughter is being a bit sensitive. I'll apologize for my stupid sense of humor later," Dan answered.

Hermione returned a few minutes later. Emma gave her a questioning look and Hermione shook her head. Dan apologized for the joke and she waved him off as if it were nothing. Minister Abraxan asked about her plans for after she finished school.

"I have decided that I want to go into medicine or teach," Hermione answered.

"Since when?" Harry asked.

"I've always been interested in medicine. I think it runs in the family. I've discovered this year that I really enjoy teaching too," Hermione said. Emma smiled at her daughter. When she was little she had wanted to be a teddy bear doctor. Something told Emma to keep that particular fact to herself for now.

"When were you going to tell me?" Harry asked. To Hermione it sounded as if he were whining but it was a valid question.

"We haven't exactly had a lot of time together lately have we?" She asked trying to not start an argument.

"It doesn't sound like a new thing though. You had career counseling during fifth year with Professor McGonagall," he pointed out.

"Yes, I did. All the while the big toad sat there and poo pooped every thing that was said. Rubbish, waste of time," Hermione told him. Harry smiled at that.

"Did you just call Professor McGonagall a toad?" Minister Abraxan asked in shock. McGonagall laughed.

"I believe, Minister, that she was referring to Delores Umbridge. Poo pooped is quite polite Miss Granger," the headmistress said.

"Yes, ma'am," Hermione replied. She avoided Professor McGonagall's eyes so that she could contain her laughter. The accidental magic she had performed during that session was something that she and Professor McGonagall had agreed never to speak of. Especially after they had laughed until they cried at Umbridge who was unconscious and covered in dragon dung.

"You never said what you picked fifth year," Harry told her with a frown.

"And you and Ron never asked me either," she pointed out. She ate a couple bites of her vegetables while he thought about that.

"It was a pretty bad year," he mused.

"Yes, it was. If I still had the time turner I would go back to the beginning of it and hex the warts off that witch," Hermione told him softly. Harry laughed and she squeezed his hand. Not all of their moments were bad and they both lived for ones like this.

"I was hoping you would join the ministry Miss Granger," Abraxan said.

"I wanted to when I was younger, but writing reports on cauldron thickness is not how I want to spend my life," Hermione said. Harry smiled about how earnest Percy had been. He found Molly and Arthur in the crowd easily. Molly looked up when she felt his gaze and he gave her his best forced smile. She returned the same type of smile and they understood each other.

"I'm sure that we could find a job for you that is not a complete waste of time," Abraxan told Hermione. While things were very much improved under Abraxan, Hermione would rather snap her wand than work at the ministry. Hermione smiled politely and humored her.

"Like what?" Hermione asked. Emma carefully kept her surprised look off her face. She knew her daughter's feelings. Diane was smirking and Jack was still looking around in wonder.

“There are many openings. I am sure your NEWTs will be outstanding,” Abraxan told her. Hermione nodded and continued to eat.

“And you Mr. Potter? Are you still interested in becoming an Auror?” Abraxan asked.

“I’ve been examining my options a bit more lately. I have been working with Gringotts and trying to figure out what to do with my investments. Hermione and Diane have both had several interesting ideas for foundations. I don’t think being an Auror is in my future,” Harry said.

“Interesting. You have been quite adamant about that being your career choice,” Professor McGonagall said. Harry nodded.

“I was until someone pointed out that I have more money than the queen. I want to do something useful with it. Too many things are wrong with the world that can be fixed if the right time, effort and money are put into them,” he answered.

Harry stayed as long as he could stand the forced polite conversation. He excused himself saying he wanted to check with the Order members that were working tonight. Dan left with him.

Jack noted that Dan was wearing his pistol and Harry his sword. Feeling like he was under-armed he volunteered to go with them.

“How long before they are in the room of requirements playing golf?” Diane asked after they left.

“It takes about forty five minutes to do one round of the castle. I give them an hour,” Hermione answered. She looked at her plate and decided that she had eaten enough. She was aware of Poppy’s expert eyes watching her. She caught a slight nod from the healer.

“Hermione what was that potion?” Emma asked. Hermione cringed. She had not been eating with her parents to avoid the questions.

“A vitamin supplement,” Hermione told her. Emma nodded as she took several of them herself.

Two hours later they found their men in the room of requirements hitting on a driving range. They were relaxed, smiling and making really bad jokes.

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Reggie McDonald looked up at the doorway in shock.

“How did you get in here?” He demanded reaching for his wand. The two men dressed in black muggle clothes and masks didn’t answer. Instead they summoned his wand and bound him quickly.

They stunned him and then set to work. When they left he was hanging upside down and naked in the doorway of his office.

He would find the other surprises later.

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February 1

Harry continued to meet with Bill Weasley once a month. As January turned to February, Bill returned with answers to two things that Harry had asked about. He handed Harry a parchment and said “These are the addresses to three properties that Dolohov owns through different names. It would be very hard for the Ministry to find this information.”

Surprised that he could find the addresses, Harry asked, “How did you get them?”

Bill smiled and replied, “Griphook searched Dolohov’s vault under the pretense of performing a physical inventory of the assets, which by the way, have been considerably depleted in the last year. It’s not that uncommon for a property to be owned under a name that would be difficult to tie back to the real owner. The villa that you visited over the holiday is owned by Turnbull Property Management, Ltd. Nothing in that sounds like Harry Potter.”

Curious, Harry asked, "When you have the time, please see if you can find how that relationship started and when the property was acquired."

Bill nodded and replied, "No worries. What else?"

Harry was going to ask Bill to give the addresses to Minister Abraxan, but didn't want to compromise Bill or Griphook's part in obtaining them. He would do it himself. Instead he asked, "How's Fleur?"

Bill smiled and replied, "Very pregnant. Mum stops over, a lot."

Harry smiled, but didn't say anything. He knew that Fleur must have been missing her own mum terribly. After a moment he replied, "Thanks for your help, Bill. I really appreciate it."

It was Bill's turn to laugh. "Harry it's I who need to thank you. You arranged one of the best jobs at the branch for me and I really love it. Egypt was fun but coming home at night is everything."

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February 5

A few days later Harry met with Remus. He had come by to tell Harry that the basilisk body armor was done. Harry asked him to give them out to the people in the fighting group, Hermione, Dan, and Emma, McGonagall, and Susan, leaving two spare sets. He also asked that Remus collect the old sets and give them to Sunset, Abraxan, and the sixth year DA members who weren't already in the Order.

That afternoon he went to Diagon Alley to visit Minister Abraxan. There were several for sale signs outside shops that had been busy a year or two earlier. He made a note to himself to ask Bill to look into buying them. It had been Harry's intent to ask Abraxan to post spotters a distance from Dolohov's properties like she had done the last time. He was surprised when John Thomas insisted on taking the operation over.

“Are you certain, Sir?”

“We’re the Ministry Magical Law Enforcement group. This should be handled by proper ministry officials, not some militia.” Harry ignored the insult.

Abraxan didn’t say anything. She knew that Thomas had been ruffled over the raid that Harry’s Order had run on the Death Eater house in Wales. It was obvious that he hadn’t gotten over it and she knew that he would insist on charging up this particular hill without outside assistance. She also knew that Harry’s group had better equipment in the event of a firefight and prayed that Thomas’ show of one-upsmanship wouldn’t ultimately get some good people killed.

Harry who had a much better relationship with Minister Abraxan than Director Thomas, nodded and replied, “Good luck Director. I’d best get back to school now. Thank you for your time.”

Abraxan stood and said, “Thank you for your help, Mr. Potter. I also wanted to thank you for the package that Mr. Lupin dropped off. He has outstanding taste.” She casually tapped her side and smiled.

Harry smiled back understanding her unspoken message, nodded and replied, “Cheers.”

Later that night he and Hermione had an argument that started when he noticed her relief that the Ministry had taken over the raid. He sometimes wondered if she had any confidence in his abilities at all. They ended up going to bed angry at each other.

He heard her crying in her room and it made him feel awful. The next morning they both pretended that nothing had happened and that her eyes were not tinged with red.

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A week later Diane softly knocked on Emma’s door. Her old University roommate let her in and gave her a hug. “Hi Diane. Come in.”

“Hi Em. How was your day?”

Emma answered as they walked to the love seat in front of the fireplace, “Fun and frustrating both at the same time. A part of me misses our practice and another part feels like we’re actually making a difference in shaping a better life for Hermione. It’s such a world of contrasts. In a lot of ways I feel like we’re looking at a completely different culture. I don’t know if they’ve locked themselves in or are desperately trying to lock the rest of the world out.”

“What does Hermione think?”

Emma replied, “The ingrained superiority and prejudices didn’t really become apparent until she was about twelve. It’s obvious that much of their government is based on family ties and cronyism. Throw a bit of old money into the equation and you have a recipe for disaster. You’re witnessing the result of generations of spoiled, arrogant kids who possess the power to kill another person with just a thought. It’s really quite frightening to think about.”

Diane nodded and shuddered at the thought. She remarked, “I had a conversation with the painting of Professor Dumbledore the other day. He told me about a dark wizard who had aligned himself with Hitler in the late 30s.”

Emma asked, “How did it end?”

Diane replied, “In the summer of 1945 Professor Dumbledore snuck into Grindelwald’s fortress and shot him seven times with the pistol that he gave Harry.”

Emma remembered hearing Hermione tell her that Dumbledore was considered the greatest wizard of the age and had seen his picture on the wizard trading cards that Hermione had brought home after her first year. She knew that many of the students now traded the cards with Harry’s picture on it. She recalled that the card mentioned that he’d defeated someone in 1945. She replied, “Hermione told me about that.”

Diane asked, "Did anyone think less of him because he shot the evil wizard?"

"I doubt it. He helped end a war."

Diane replied, "Then why not just shoot this Voldemort with a pistol or better yet a sniper rifle from a half mile away?"

Emma smiled sadly and replied, "Too practical I guess."

"So what are they going to do, challenge each other to a duel at twenty paces?" Diane looked at her best friend with concern realizing that that was exactly what Harry was likely to do.

Emma shuddered and replied, "I hope not. Even odds are nowhere near good enough in my book."

They thought about that for a moment and Emma called for Jonie the house elf. She asked her to bring them some hot chocolate. Diane was surprised knowing that Emma and Dan were almost fanatical about sugar intake. She didn't say anything about it though. One could only drink so much tea.

Changing the subject Diane asked, "Did Harry and Hermione work out their differences?"

Emma shrugged slightly and replied, "As well as they can, I suppose. You would know more about that than I would. They're so stressed out. Now he's taking it as his fault that those three Aurors got killed last night."

"Why would I know more and how would he possibly consider it to have been his responsibility?"

"Are they not having sessions with you? Apparently he supplied the Ministry with the address of the house that they raided. The ministry positioned a spotter and suggested that the raid begin. Voldemort came back early."

Diane shuddered again. She purposely avoided the question about the sessions not wanting, nor able to tell Emma that Harry's had abruptly stopped and that Hermione's had almost doubled. Instead she asked, "What happened?"

"The Aurors killed or captured eight Death Eaters and had started to leave when Voldemort showed up along with three others. Apparently three Aurors were killed. Only one got away." Emma shivered a bit knowing that Harry and Hermione had both been on a similar mission.

"Who?"

"Bob Sunset who went on the trip with us. He got hit with some sort of spell, but was wearing Harry's old set of body armor and lived to talk about it. Apparently he was the only one on the raid wearing body armor," explained Emma.

"His lucky day, I guess. I saw a small article about it in the Daily Prophet. I'm surprised that there wasn't more detail."

"There was," replied Dan who had just walked in. The other paper, The Quibbler had a much more comprehensive article." He handed it to Diane.

Ministry raid goes bad

Director of Magical Law Enforcement Director John Thomas acknowledged the deaths of three Aurors this morning. Thomas reported that Aurors Laura McDonald, Eugene Wilderberry and Nick Straighthand were killed at the conclusion of a raid on Death Eater Antonin Dolohov's estate in Nottingham. Eight Death Eaters tied to Voldemort were killed in the raid.

Thomas reported that he and the other Aurors had left moments earlier to transport evidence that had been collected at the home and the others were in the process of torching the home when Voldemort, Dolohov, Lucius and Draco Malfoy suddenly appeared. Before the Aurors could leave, Straighthand, and Wilderberry were hit. McDonald was killed after hitting Dolohov with a spell. Auror Sunset was able to activate a portkey that he had been carrying, even after

being hit with a curse. Auror Sunset was taken to St. Mungo's for treatment of his injuries and is expected to make a full recovery.

The Death Eaters were identified as Romanian nationals. All wore the Dark Mark.

Thomas offered no comment when asked why the other Aurors left the scene a full minute before the attack started.

Diane put the paper down and asked, "Where's Harry?"

Dan replied, "He and Hermione had gone with Alyx to visit Sunset. They just got back. Riddle had cut off the heads of the three Aurors and impaled them onto polls. They were found just a few minutes ago just south of the village." Dan looked grim as he was saying the words. The war seemed to be getting uglier and more personal with each passing month.

Diane looked as disgusted as Emma. Fortunately none of the Aurors that had been killed had children who were students. She spent another hour with her friends. She could see that they were worried about the kids but had managed to figure out some way to relieve themselves of some the stress of it all. She didn't ask about it. She was just glad that they were able to cope.

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Minerva was clearly losing patience. "Mr. Crow. I realize that they're under a tremendous amount of stress, but you have to make things right between them. It's acceptable to continue with the death count, but they simply have to get along, and wherever did you leave that wet, white bikini? You need to fix this and fix it now."

"Yes Professor."

Chapter 25

Bob Sunset was grateful to be alive. Dolohov had hit him squarely with a flame cutter hex and by all rights he should be in two pieces. Instead, he had second-degree burns, a damaged vest, a beautiful girlfriend and two really good friends.

Minister Abraxan had left his room at St. Mungo's moments earlier. She was wearing the vest that Hermione had given her. Each dragonhide set would have cost about a year's salary for an Auror. None of the three who had been killed were wearing body armor, and his set wouldn't have stopped a killing curse.

He had told her that the others had left a minute earlier and he, McDonald, Wilderberry and Straighthand were just about to flame the home when Voldemort and the Malfoys had arrived. Voldemort had killed Wilderberry instantly. Lucius and Draco had killed Straighthand. Dolohov had hit him and Riddle had killed McDonald. He had hit Dolohov with a Reducto charm and activated the portkey that was in the pocket of the vest. It had taken him to Hogsmeade station. Gunner and Chambers were nearby on an exercise with Moody, saw him and they had immediately taken him to St. Mungo's.

Hermione shared with him her experience at the Department of Mysteries. She was glad he was going to be okay. She and Harry didn't visit for long instead choosing to let Alyx stay and help him recover.

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Hermione chewed on the end of her quill. It helped her to think. Though she would never admit it, especially to her parents,

sometimes she missed the taste of the plastic casing on muggle pens. Her parents used to get upset when she would chew on things while thinking.

Her parents would have a fit if they knew that this particular quill was made of sugar. Hermione finished her notations and then the quill. She didn't want to leave any evidence she thought with a bit of a smirk. A quick spell got rid of the sugar on her teeth.

She was ready for the meeting to start. She had asked her team to think of ways to weaken Voldemort. She hoped they had some good ideas.

Her Mum and Flitwick arrived first. Emma was enjoying her temporary assignment as one of the muggle studies professors. She and Flitwick were discussing the different ways to motivate students. Hermione didn't listen to the conversation. She had rarely needed to be motivated to study.

Molly, Arabella, Tom and Diggle arrived next. They again had stopped for a drink before the meeting. Molly was looking even better.

Susan and Padma arrived with Poppy. They had just finished a medi training class and the teens' heads were spinning at the thought of banishing someone's blood. One slip and your patient would be dead.

Sprout and Luna came in together. They were discussing herbology. It was a new interest for Luna, one that had developed when her interest in Neville Longbottom came to be.

Harry came in a few minutes later. He took a seat at the far end of the table without commenting. Hermione looked over the group and decided it was time.

"Good we're all here. Last time I asked for opinions on how to weaken Voldemort during a wand fight. What did you come up with?" Hermione said. Harry frowned but didn't comment. When he had mentioned coming to the meeting and Hermione had wanted to veto the idea.

They went around the table and started throwing out ideas. Hermione conjured the whiteboard and the ideas started appearing on it.

The Cruciatus curse instantly got a line drawn through it.

The power-draining curse of Istanbul was discarded because of the effect on the caster. No one wanted to chance being turned in to a pile of dust.

The idea of banishing his blood came from Padma. Poppy flinched and Susan looked sick. "It's not like we would be doing it to a patient we are trying to save," Padma objected.

"We can't. It is very easily stopped just by a thought from the person it is being cast on. Taking someone's blood is not as easy as it sounds," Poppy told them.

Emma noticed Harry rubbing his arm with a scowl on his face.

Molly had come up with a few of the more intense cleaning spells. Some of them could rip your skin off. Harry had smiled at the idea in jest but Hermione thought it had potential. The rest of the group followed Harry's reaction.

Flitwick had come up with several charms that could bind him but they were easily broken.

Sprout liked the idea of another bomb, like the silver ones they had discussed earlier. The problem was it would affect all of them, not just Voldemort.

Hermione waited until all the ideas were up on the board before she added hers.

"The Patronus Charm?" Luna asked. Her eyes unfocused and then she smiled. "You're brilliant Hermione."

"Thank you but I don't know if it will work," Hermione answered.

"What is your line of thought?" Emma asked not following.

“During the fight at the department of mysteries Voldemort possessed Harry. He left when Harry’s feelings turned to good thoughts based on his love for Sirius. A Patronus is a magnified manifestation of happy thought. It is the only thing I could find for channeling love into a spell. Can a Patronus possibly be directed?” Hermione asked.

“Yes!” Flitwick squeaked. “It is an almost lost art as the Patronus is naturally attracted to Dementors and do not have to be directed.”

Flitwick asked Hermione to stand at the edge of the table and then he pointed his wand at her.

He squeaked the incantation and a miniature horse galloped at Hermione. She saw his wrist moving to control where the horse would run. After running it around the room he had it slam into Hermione.

“Wow. That’s like taking pepper up potion only better,” she commented.

Harry stood and everyone looked at him. He pointed his wand and stated the same incantation. Prongs galloped happily around the room before Harry had it slam into Hermione. This time the reaction was more intense.

She had an orgasm.

Emma snickered at the noise she made and Hermione blushed beet red. She was glad that Harry was as embarrassed as she was.

“That was... um... really nice,” Hermione finally said smoothing her robes.

Emma and Susan both exploded in laughter and Harry sunk into his seat. Hermione chewed on her lip and their eyes met. She sat back down and did a quick cleaning charm on herself while everyone watched the hysterical women laugh.

“Pavlov?” Emma asked when she finally caught her breath. She was wiping away tears. Susan got the hiccups and Hermione was

reminded of the night that Sunset and Chambers had invaded their date.

Molly didn't look impressed. She couldn't believe that Emma was laughing about it. If it had been Ginny she would have dragged the girl out of the room by her ear for a talk.

"Well it certainly transfers good feelings but will it hurt Voldemort?" Hermione asked to get the meeting back on target. Emma heard the self-doubt in Hermione's voice. She didn't think her idea was good enough.

"I don't know enough about the charm," Emma said after everyone else had weighed in with their opinion. The group was pretty much evenly split. Hermione slid her research on the Patronus charm to her mother. Emma instantly began to read it.

"I like Molly's suggestion of the cleaning charms. Some of them are pretty rough and if nothing else, they would distract him for a moment. If everyone hit him with an oven scouring charm in the same spot it would blow a hole in him like the Reducto charm," Hermione said.

"Why not use Reducto then?" Susan asked.

"Reducto can be blocked easily. The scouring charm is weakened but it gets through a shield," Molly told them.

"What is this note about emotional change?" Emma asked still looking over her daughter's notes.

"Last year Tonks' Patronus temporarily changed from a chameleon to a wolf. I was interested in why it changed," Hermione answered.

"So the form can change depending on what you are focused on? So does the memory that you are using when you cast change the effect of the charm on a person?" Emma asked.

They discussed what Hermione had felt when the two Patronus' had hit her. It was obvious that she had two very different reactions.

Flitwick had been thinking of his youngest daughter and Harry admitted that he was thinking about Edinburgh.

"We need to perform some experiments on a control group," Poppy suggested.

"Why?" Harry asked.

"Two Patronus charms on one person is not enough for a conclusion," Hermione told the group.

"But it's obvious that you felt two different things," Harry objected.

Hermione nodded in agreement. "Yes, I did. But we need more information to conclude what it might do to Voldemort."

"Perform the tests tomorrow," Harry told them.

Hermione got irritated. She wanted to snap at him but refrained.

"I have potions tomorrow but I can ditch the class," Hermione said. She glanced at Flitwick and Sprout and said, "Pretend you didn't hear that."

The professors both laughed.

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Hermione and Poppy were both up all night working out the control situation and the participants of the test. Hermione took meticulous notes and wrote up their theories in detail. By breakfast they were ready.

Hermione asked one of the house elves to summon the group that they had compiled. After they agreed to participate Poppy sent Professor McGonagall a note that the eleven of them needed to be excused from class.

Harry joined them just after the tests began. Hermione was chugging coffee as she watched Padma struggle to perform the charm for the third time in as many minutes.

Harry approached Padma to help her out but Hermione led him away. After Padma was successful Hermione made a couple of notes and then handed her a chunk of chocolate. Lisa Turpin was next.

Harry intervened several more times before Hermione handed him the parchment containing the theories. She told him to read it and not to interfere with the test again. He left after looking over the writing. Hermione sighed in relief.

The testing took all morning and some of the afternoon. When they finished Poppy gave each of the exhausted students a large chocolate bar and told them to finish it before going to bed.

Hermione went back to her room intent on getting some sleep. Harry was there. He was sitting at his desk with a Quidditch magazine.

"What were the results?" Harry asked without saying hello. Hermione frowned at his tone.

"We still need to compile the results into something useful. I'm going to take a nap first though. I was up all night," she answered.

"Useful? Those tests were pretty pointless if you ask me," he told her.

"What?" she exclaimed.

"We know the charm has an emotional effect on you. Why wouldn't it on Voldemort? Besides those Patronus' I saw today were weak. They wouldn't have stopped a dementor," he said.

"It's a good thing the experiment is on humans then isn't it? Did you read the theories I gave you or did you scan through them and decide to let me explain it?" Hermione asked sarcastically.

"Are you saying I'm too stupid to understand your writing?"

"No, I'm saying you're too lazy to read it because you think it's pointless and useless anyway, so why bother?" she asked.

"You think a barely formed Patronus like the one I saw Padma do is going to effect Voldemort?"

"I don't know Harry. I haven't compiled the results of the test group yet. Why should I bother since it's just stupid of me to want to be thorough with my conclusions," she snapped.

"I didn't say that you were stupid. I guess I just don't understand why it is so important. Why were you up all night?" he asked.

"You're the one who said that we had to do these tests today. There was a lot of preparation involved," she said in irritation.

"It was only a suggestion," he said mildly and was very surprised when she laughed bitterly.

"Right. I know an order when I hear one, Harry, but that's beside the point. The reason they are so important is because, I don't want you to die. Whatever we decide to weaken him with has to work one hundred and fifty percent or we need to find something else that will. It has to be right," she told him in an almost desperate voice. He closed the gap between them and hugged her.

"I'm so sorry," he said softly.

"You have to trust me on the research Harry. I second-guess myself enough as it is. I can't have you coming in and taking over. Can you please let me do my job the way it needs to be done," she asked him. He sighed.

"I didn't take over," he objected.

"Last night everyone was watching your reaction Harry. Molly's ideas were sound but one look from you and everyone else shot them down. Brainstorming doesn't work like that. We have to be able to throw something out and discuss it. I know Moody probably doesn't run the

fighting group that way, but in research I need everyone's objective opinion," Hermione told him.

She had a point. His Patronus may be five times stronger than Padma's but he would be busy fighting Riddle. The others would be casting the charm. He hugged her close and then kissed her temple. He could tell she was exhausted. He offered to put her to bed but she declined. After he left to go to the great hall for dinner she sat down at her desk. There was a large pile of mail that she needed to go through. She sighed and picked up an advance copy of Teen Witch Weekly. Alicia had sent it over to let her know of the brewing storm.

She took it to bed with her knowing that gossip would put her to sleep faster than a sleeping draught.

... --- ...

The next morning Dan and Emma were eating breakfast with the rest of the Professors. Dan was keeping an eye out for Hermione. She had been sleeping when he had stopped to check on her the night before.

When she finally arrived, Hermione was completely out of uniform. He nudged his wife and she shrugged. Hermione looked nice in her almost formal robes. Neither of them knew why she was dressed that way though.

She approached the head table and handed Poppy a stack of parchment. Poppy began to read. Then Hermione approached McGonagall.

"I'm leaving for the morning Professor. I just wanted to let you know that I will be back in time for lunch," Hermione said handing McGonagall a slip of parchment. McGonagall looked at it and then nodded.

"Tell Mr. Potter not to dawdle," McGonagall commented looking for him.

“He’s still in bed. Apparently Moody worked him hard last night,” Hermione said with a shrug.

“I see. You’re going alone? Take one of the Aurors with you please,” McGonagall said. Hermione knew it wasn’t a request and she felt her temper start to rise. She held it in check.

“Yes, Ma’am. May I ask Remus instead? I have something I want to discuss with him,” she answered. McGonagall nodded and Hermione moved on to talk to her parents. They didn’t ask where she was going. She left five minutes before Harry entered the great hall.

Remus agreed and they walked slowly to Hogsmeade station to apparate to the Ministry entrance. She didn’t tell Remus why she wanted to know about Harry’s parents but he probably guessed.

... --- ...

Dan was again looking for his daughter while he ate. It was lunchtime and he had been concerned ever since she had left the castle. McGonagall had told him that she was meeting with the Minister of Magic. He almost wished that he had gone with her. He had a few things he would like to say to the Minister himself.

“What is that girl doing?” Emma asked. He followed her line of sight to Harry. There was a fifth year girl almost on his lap.

“Lookin’ ta get cursed if ‘Mione see er,” Hagrid answered.

“What in the world?” McGonagall asked looking startled at her brash behavior.

“I confiscated a copy of the new Teen Witch Weekly this morning. Apparently that girl believes the rumor that Harry and Hermione are through,” Sprout told them.

“What?” Dan asked.

“Stay out of it,” Emma told him firmly.

“I will not...”

“You will too. Our daughter is an adult. How would you like my father to have stepped in every time we argued?” she asked. Diane choked on her drink and Dan didn’t answer.

“It looks as if Mr. Potter has taken care of the situation,” Slughorn told them.

They watched as the girl moved away from him. Not by much though and she didn’t get out of Hermione’s seat. It was unfortunate for her Hermione had just walked in the door.

... --- ...

Hermione entered the great hall and gave the room a quick scan. She saw Romilda Vane in the seat next to Harry and felt her brow wrinkle. She wasn’t too concerned about it though. Vane had sent Harry the chocolates with the love potion in them a year ago.

As she walked towards him she caught Lavender’s eye. Lavender smirked at Romilda knowing the girl was about to get what she deserved. Hermione stepped up behind Harry and put her hand on his shoulder. He looked up and gave her a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. She returned one just the same. She ran her hand through the back of his hair knowing it relaxed him.

“Mmmm. That feels good, love. You look nice. Where’ve you been hiding?” he asked. Hermione glanced at Seamus and Romilda and shook her head slightly.

“Tell you later. I need to talk to Madame Pomfrey for a moment. Save me some soup?” she asked. She got a better smile for her efforts on his head.

She gave Poppy the results from her trip to the ministry. The master healer started to read the conclusions immediately. Hermione saw her do a double take as she was answering a question from her Mum.

"This is very interesting Miss Granger. Did you witness this?" Poppy asked. When Hermione nodded she continued, "I would like to review your memory."

"It was very unpleasant," Hermione said hedging away from the idea.

"I expect so. When is your last class today?"

"I just missed my last class," Hermione answered.

"Skipping class two days in a row?" Poppy teased. Hermione didn't smile. "Very well then. After lunch meet me in the hospital wing with your pensive. Oh, did you finish your chocolate last night?"

"No. I fell asleep," Hermione answered.

"You missed dinner too. Go eat your lunch Hermione. I'll get you another bar of chocolate," Poppy said. It was not a request. Hermione felt sick to her stomach and food was the last thing she wanted.

Hermione was going to object but instead just answered, "Yes, Ma'am."

"You're going to have to teach me how you do that," Emma commented when Hermione was out of earshot.

"You mean get her to walk away with out arguing? It's easy. I'm not her mother," Poppy said with a smile. Emma laughed.

"Well that's not likely to change anytime soon," Emma said as she watched Hermione's retreating back.

Poppy smiled and then called for Winky.

... --- ...

Hermione sat down across from Harry and he slid a bowl of soup over to her. She nodded.

"Thank you," she said picking up a piece of bread.

"I missed you this mor..." Harry was interrupted as Winky appeared. She hopped up on the bench and sat a chocolate bar next to Hermione's bowl.

"Thank you, Winky," Hermione said. When Winky didn't pop away like she expected she said, "Is there something else you need, Winky?"

"Nos Miss Hermione. Madame Poppy and Mrs. Emma tells me to makes sure youse eat all the chocolate bars. I stay until youse finish," Winky answered.

"I'll finish it Winky," Hermione said. She would too. Next week sometime.

"And I's make sure. Miss Hermione can not be getting sick."

"Since when do you work for Madame Pomfrey or Dr. Emma?" Harry asked, amused. Winky bounced a bit and watched Hermione eat.

"I's work for you Mr. Harry. I's make sure your Hermione not get sick," Winky said. Harry chuckled and Seamus laughed.

Hermione just kept eating her soup under the watchful eye of Winky and the glare of Romilda.

"Elves should never be seen or heard," Romilda sniffed as she glowered at Winky. Winky cringed.

"So Winky how are things at home?" Harry asked. He smiled at the elf.

"They is fine, Mr. Harry. We's not have much to do since Mr. Dan and Mrs. Emma comes to Hogwarts. Only the other two are at your home."

"Meet me in the dining room at eight tonight then. I have something for you to do," Harry told her. Winky squeaked in excitement.

"I'll help you as soon as I make sure your Hermione not getting sick. Mrs. Emma insisted that I make sure she eat okay," Winky said. Harry grinned as Hermione squirmed a little.

Hermione turned and looked at her mum and Poppy. The master healer smirked and the dentist waved. Hermione sighed.

"Harry, darling, why would your elf take orders from her mother?" Romilda asked.

"Mrs. Emma in charge. She smart lady," Winky answered.

"I wasn't talking to you elf. Really Harry, you need someone to teach you how to keep your servants in their place," Romilda snapped. Hermione put down her spoon. She had reached the end of her straw and was ready to draw on the younger girl.

"Winky isn't a servant. She's my friend and no one speaks to my friends that way," Harry told Romilda. Hermione decided that ignoring was better than hexing. She picked up the chocolate and began to unwrap it.

"I can't believe she has the nerve to sit here with you after what she did," Romilda said to Harry.

"Huh?" Harry asked. Even now girls could be confusing.

"Her," Romilda hissed glaring at Hermione who thought the look could probably melt the chocolate.

"What'd you do to me?" Harry asked mildly. Hermione shrugged lightly.

"According to Teen Witch Weekly I've slipped you a love potion. Oh, it's wearing off too," Hermione answered. She looked at the candy and tried to determine if she would vomit if she ate it all. She gave it a sixty percent chance.

"Oh rubbish," Harry said crossly.

"Yes, it is. The whole article is filled with lies. Alicia sent me an advanced copy of the rag. I left it on your desk if you want to read it," Hermione told him. Winky motioned for her to eat and Hermione reached for the candy again.

"Oh my poor Harry. First Snape says those awful things now Teen Witch Weekly..." Romilda said wrapping her arm around Harry. Harry threw off her arm and glared at her. Lavender and Seamus seemed shocked at his reaction. Hermione wasn't. She knew that mentioning Snape was not a good thing to do.

"Lies, damn liars and the fools who believe them," Hermione said softly.

Harry bristled.

"What is that supposed to mean?" he demanded. Hermione wanted to smack Romilda. Every time Snape's name was mentioned Harry would pick a fight, most of the time with Hermione.

"Exactly what I said. It's a bunch of rubbish that only idiots believe," she said softly. She didn't want to fight with him. Her morning had been horrid.

"Are you calling me an idiot?" he demanded. His volume was growing. Romilda smirked at Hermione.

"No, I was calling her one," Hermione said nodding at the fifth year.

"Cause that's what it sounded like to me," he said as if she had not spoken. He was practically yelling at her and the rest of the room had gone silent.

"Well I wasn't. You don't think I used a love potion on you, do you?" She snapped.

"I wasn't talking about that. I was talking about Snape! You think I believe those lies he told don't you?" He shouted getting to his feet. Hermione stood up too.

“How would I know what you believe? You refuse to talk about it,” she yelled back.

Since the trial they had snipped at each other constantly. They had argued more than a few times. They had fought a couple times. It wasn't always Harry's fault nor was it Hermione's. It had always been in private and while several people knew about it, Diane was the only one who knew the truth about the intensity behind it. That was about to change and the otherwise brave Gryffindors that were sitting at their table all backed away slowly. Except for Romilda who apparently was both brave and stupid.

“Oh yeah, there you go again. I don't want to talk about it,” he told her.

“You brought it up!” she yelled back.

“Why can't you just let it go? Why do you keep pushing?” he screamed.

“What in the bloody hell are you talking about? Oh, I see. If me telling you that I love you and that I'm here for you is pushing well then I'm so sorry,” she shouted back at him.

“Do you have any idea what his words did to me?” he roared. “Of course not. You know your parents!”

“And you could know yours too if you weren't so afraid of what you might hear about them. You'd rather mope around and cut yourself off from the people who care about you than find out the truth,” she yelled back.

“How the hell am I supposed to do that, they're dead!” he screamed.

“Yes they are, Harry. I'm sorry, but you disgrace their memories by listening to what Snape and Petunia have to say about them without considering talking to anyone else who knew them. Professor McGonagall, Professor Flitwick and Remus all knew them well and you can't be bothered to find out the truth. Fine, you can mope around and be miserable and angry. Take all the self-pity you want

but don't think for a second that I'm going to let you take out your anger on me!"

She turned and left the table before she managed to make anything break. She had been holding that in for a while and after the morning she had it was too much. Winky grabbed the chocolate bar and followed her.

"Oh poor Harry. She's such a bitch to be so mean to you," Romilda said trying to hug Harry. He pushed her away roughly.

"Winky stop Hermione," Harry said softly. He knew the elf would hear him and she did.

"Get out of my way Winky," Hermione was saying as he came up behind her.

"I wasn't done talking to you," Harry snapped spinning her around. She wanted to slap him but could see that her words had done a lot of damage.

"You weren't talking. You were yelling and I won't sit for it," she snarled.

"I know. You shouldn't. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled at you," he said. She could tell he was still angry.

"I'm sorry too. I shouldn't have yelled back or said those horrible things. I just get so frustrated when you get so distant," she told him. She was pretty irked herself.

"Distant? Hermione, I'm not pushing you away. I just... You can't possibly understand what his words did to me," Harry told her. She let that go since she knew it was true.

"I know, love. But you are distancing yourself from me. It hurts like hell that you don't want me," she said in almost a whisper. She turned not wanting him to see her tears.

“Don’t want you? What would give you that mad idea?” he asked just as softly as she had.

Their eyes met and a memory passed between them. Harry in his boxers and robe. Hermione trying to get him aroused. He pulled her hands from himself and told her that it was late. She cried for an hour knowing he didn’t want her any more.

Not counting the bizarre Patronus incident, and Hermione didn’t, they hadn’t been intimate since the trial.

“Oh Merlin, Hermione. That wasn’t about you. I want you so badly sometime I swear I’m going to explode. But after what he said, every time I think about it I hear him in my head. I don’t want that when I am with you. I won’t let him ruin what we have. It’s too... You’re too precious,” Harry told her. His anger was gone. Hers was too and a small sob escaped from her into his chest.

“Forgive me, Hermione,” he asked softly. Then he murmured, “I just can’t do it without you,” he said.

“Can’t do what?” she asked into his chest.

“Live,” he said softly into her hair.

... --- ...

Hermione went to the hospital wing and shared her memory of that morning with Harry, Poppy and Diane.

She had gone to the ministry of magic with Remus and met with Abraxan. The minister had allowed them to test the Patronus charm on Snape.

Snape was a shadow of his former self. His language made little sense and he drooled a lot. He would occasionally hit his shaved head on the back of the chair he was tied in. The burns were more apparent in the hospital gown that covered little.

All things considered, he made Lockhart look mentally sound.

The results of the test were interesting. When thinking about how much she loved Harry, her otter had attacked the dark mark and made it burn red-hot. Snape had screamed like he was under the Cruciatus curse.

Hermione had dropped her wand in shock. She didn't want to continue the tests and was quite relieved when she couldn't get her Patronus to form again. Remus took over and performed the rest of the tests. It was all Hermione could do to watch but Snape only reacted to the Patronus if the memory involved a strong memory of love.

They each performed the charm one last time thinking of their significant others just to be sure. When they left Snape was unconscious. Neither Hermione nor Remus felt good about it.

The truth was that Hermione felt awful. She knew what she had done was wrong on so many levels. She felt like she was no better than their enemies.

Diane insisted that they leave the castle for the rest of the day and night. She knew that they needed time to talk. Not just about the stuff they had been screaming at each other during lunch either.

They apparated to number twelve after seeing her parents. Emma was worried about them and they managed to convince her that they were going to go talk and not scream at each other. Dan was silent the whole time, observing them.

Diane spent the better part of two hours talking to them about choices during war. She wasn't sure if she was getting through to them or not.

Harry sidelong apparated Diane to her house and she surprised Jack for the night. She wanted nothing more than to spend the night with her best friend. She got what she wanted.

She hoped Harry and Hermione were able to relax and enjoy each other too. She doubted it though.

In two days it would be Friday the 13th - another full moon.

... --- ...

Harry, Kingsley, Alyx, Gunner, Fred and George spent Friday night flying patrol over Hogsmeade while disillusioned. The evening was cold and the two-hour shifts seemed like an eternity. At the end of each shift they returned back to the castle chilled to the bone.

They came back empty-handed.

... --- ...

At nine PM Dan was surprised by Brigid appearing in the library in a flash of flame. She held a page of a newspaper in her beak and put it down in front of him. Dan picked up the special late evening edition of the Times, studied it for a minute, got up to go to the loo, took two steps and vomited. Flitwick went over and helped him. "What's wrong, Dan?"

All Dan could manage to get out was, "Get Harry." He vomited again. Flitwick waved his wand once to clean his colleague up and went over to have a word with McGonagall.

The commotion at the Professor's table had not gone unnoticed by the students in the library. Hermione saw her father fall to his knees and vomit and was on her feet when McGonagall stood and said, "I want everyone to return to their common rooms for the evening. Miss Granger, please find Mr. Potter and meet with the Professors in my classroom. Mr. Longbottom, please fetch Madam Pomfrey, Miss Turpin please fetch Auror Moody." She picked up the newspapers and they hurried off.

Hermione found Harry at Hagrid's hut warming up and they flew on Harry's broom back to the castle. They made their way to the transfiguration classroom at the same time Abraxan and Thomas arrived.

Massacre at school rehearsal

York – Mrs. Asplen's second grade class was attacked during the dress rehearsal of the school play. Eleven children were kidnapped and nine were brutally murdered. Mrs. Asplen, 63 was repeatedly slashed.

Police also found urine and animal feces at the scene leading them to the conclusion that a pack of wild dogs may have entered the building sometime after the murders.

The heinous crime was reported at 8:05 PM when Michelle Gudgen arrived to pick up her daughter Lisa. Police from several counties were summoned to help in the investigation. No ransom note was found at the scene.

Abraxan put the paper down and handed it to Thomas. He looked at it and replied, "Bloody werewolves."

"Not werewolves Sir," said Hermione. "It was Fenrir Greyback. He was out recruiting."

Thomas replied, "That's what I said."

She dug in. "I believe the distinction is as wide as comparing Tom Riddle with Minister Abraxan."

"Thank you Hermione," said Abraxan, smiling. She had come to appreciate the young woman's profound intelligence and spunk. "These days, it's a pleasure to be compared favorably to anyone. What else do you think about this?"

"We think he's gathering an army of children together because they make the strongest werewolves. We believe that he has aligned himself with Riddle and we believe that he will launch a major attack next month either on Hogsmeade, Diagon Alley, or Avebury.

"We should round up all of the known werewolves," replied Thomas. "We have a month."

"Director, I respectfully disagree." Hermione was holding her ground. "The children that he's been kidnapping and converting won't be on

any of your registered werewolf lists. Remus Lupin isn't your problem simply because he's a werewolf any more than Neville Longbottom's a risk of becoming a Death Eater simply because he's a wizard."

John Thomas was a lot of things, but he wasn't a man who was used to women less than half his age debating against him in front of his boss and winning. He replied, "Miss, assuming that your information has any basis of fact, you cannot possibly believe that we should do nothing until another attack takes place. The only sensible thing to do is to round up all known werewolves. This problem is quickly spilling into the muggle world."

Abraxan gave him a look that clearly indicated that they'd have words after the meeting. She asked, "Hermione, what do you suggest?"

Hermione took a calming breath knowing that this conversation would have more impact on her future potential career opportunities within the Ministry than any NEWT scores or her C.V. (resume). While she was not the slightest bit interested in a position at the Ministry she knew that in the future things could change. She didn't mention that they were the ones who contacted the ministry, not the other way around. She replied, "We believe that the most logical targets would be Hogsmeade, Diagon Alley including Gringotts, and Avebury. Speaking on behalf of our little militia, we would be in the best position to help the villagers defend themselves. Would it be possible for you to arrange protection for Avebury, Diagon Alley and have a half dozen Mediwitches available on standby?"

Thomas looked around the room. While he personally found her theory to be highly improbable, it was obvious that everyone else in the room accepted her wild theory as all but fact. It was as if Merlin himself had spoken. He asked, "When is the next full moon?"

"March 11. Moonrise is at 7:22 PM."

"How do you plan to stop the next one that you see?" asked Thomas who doubted that they had thought about actually putting them down.

“Silver bullets from a .45,” replied Harry who didn’t want to give out any information regarding the Twin’s projects. Use a broom if you want better sightlines and a bit of protection but dress warm.”

No one commented on his response. Abraxan ended the meeting a moment later again thanking them for their information and committing that they would get back to them within a week.

... --- ...

February 14

Putting the werewolves out of his mind for now was a challenge but one that Harry had accepted. There was nothing they could do until the next full moon.

So instead he focused on better things. Harry knew that he had to do something very public for Valentines Day. Their fight in the great hall had many repercussions. There was a pack of fan girls that refused to believe that he and Hermione were still together. They had been following him around like a pack of rabid giggling dogs since he and Hermione had returned from number twelve.

Hermione had been even less amused to find out that she had a little fan club of her own in the Ravenclaw house. Several of the younger boys had decided that they wanted the Head Girl to notice them. Lisa and Susan had laughed themselves breathless when one of the boys gotten the nerve to approach Hermione. A few days earlier he had left a note next to her dinner plate and fled the great hall like a dragon was after him.

Dan was also less than amused. He had watched the argument from the Professor’s table with only Diane and Emma keeping him from interfering. When Harry had grabbed his daughter by the arm and spun her around Dan had felt the urge to beat the boy upside his head. He knew that Harry had not and would never physically hurt Hermione, but words could hurt worse than a fist sometimes. He and the younger man had talked about it and Dan had been surprised when Harry had broken down in tears.

Emma and Diane had watched it all from the sidelines. Sometimes they were amused and sometimes it hurt to watch. Both knew that they had to let the kids work out their differences and only interfere when asked for help.

Harry was finally working at getting past Snape's words. Diane had talked to him several times and she knew that he and Remus had spent a couple hours together. Hermione was still working on her insecurities. She was learning that she had to stop censoring herself when things bothered her. Eventually it would explode just like it had in the great hall.

Harry had debated what he was going to do for a while before deciding that Hermione wouldn't hex him for it. He grinned as he washed his hair. He couldn't wait to see the look on her face.

He left six-dozen red roses around their room and stole out before the woman he loved was awake. He met Dobby and Winky in the room of requirements and gave them their instructions. He gave Winky a beautiful dress and bottle of wine and told her with a wink that she and Dobby should take the rest of the day off after helping him. She showed him the elf ring that Dobby had given her and then popped away to do a job only an elf could enjoy; she had to wake up Hermione.

Harry made his way to the great hall wearing his school uniform and a giant smirk. He found a seat and was surrounded by fan girls who were all giggling and handing him presents. Seamus and Lavender were holding hands under the table watching him.

"You know his girlfriend knows more hexes than most fully qualified Aurors," Lavender said loudly. Seamus flinched.

"That she does and here she comes," Seamus said.

The fan girls scattered when they looked up and saw Hermione approaching. She was carrying a single red rose. She looked at the pile of presents and smirked. Harry promptly banished them. He conjured a yellow rose for Lavender who giggled and gave Seamus a pat on the back and a wink.

“Hi,” Hermione said smiling.

“Hi,” Harry replied.

She sat and they ate breakfast quietly.

Susan was not enjoying the holiday at all. She missed Hannah badly and her breakup with Alyx still hurt. She was surprised when dozen yellow and pink roses appeared by her plate. She looked around and then found the card. Her housemates were all watching her.

Susan,

Thank you for being my friend. I love you like the sister I never had.

Love,

Harry

She looked up and found Harry looking at her. She stood and walked over to where he was sitting with Hermione. Susan kissed him on the cheek and then grinned at Hermione.

“Don’t ever let him go Sis,” she said. Hermione smiled and nodded.

At the Professor’s table Emma jumped as a bundle of lilies appeared near her plate. She knew she would never get used to things appearing out of thin air.

“Something I should know about Em?” Dan asked her glancing at the flowers with a smirk. She read the card and then shared it with him, tears in her eyes.

Emma,

When I wonder what my Mum was like, I know in my heart she was just like you.

I love you,

Harry

Dan chuckled and took his wife's hand. He looked over at Minerva who had a bunch of tulips near her plate and a smile on her face. Sprout was looking over her tray of muggle flowers with a smile on her face. Diane was delighted with a huge box of chocolates. For a boy who had not known much love in his childhood Harry certainly knew how to make women happy.

He turned and looked at children when the hall fell silent. A goblin in a strange outfit had entered the hall and was headed straight for his daughter. The whole room was watching the goblin.

"Miss Hermione Granger?" he asked in a loud voice.

"Um yes," Hermione said hesitantly.

"I was asked to deliver a message to you from Mr. Harry Potter," he said loudly. Hermione glanced at Harry who had turned to his food with a sudden interest.

"How do I love thee? Let me count the ways..." The goblin began. Hermione heard both of her parents begin to laugh.

When the Goblin finished, having left off the end of the poem, he bowed and then handed her a letter. She watched, her face bright red as the goblin walked from the hall. She saw that everyone was watching her so she focused on the note.

Hermione,

I couldn't find the words so I stole them from Elizabeth Barrett Browning. I hope you don't mind the spectacle but I want the whole world to know that you and I are together.

I know it's not always easy to be with me. I'm moody and sometimes I shut myself off. I can't change who I am and I thank you for accepting me this way.

I pledge to spend the rest of my life doing everything I can to make you smile.

I love you more each day.

Harry

PS How does dinner tonight in Paris sound?

Hermione read the note twice and then cleared her throat. She gave him a peck on the cheek and then sighed in delight.

"I love you too. Dinner sounds lovely, Harry. When should I be ready?" she asked.

Emma watched in rapt fascination believing that her daughter had just received a marriage proposal. She wasn't certain if she was relieved or disappointed to find out that it had simply been a very public display of love.

... --- ...

Moody didn't like the idea of Harry and Hermione running off to celebrate Valentines Day. He especially didn't like that he didn't know where they were going. He warned them four times to be vigilant.

He had his own date tonight with Arabella Figg.

... --- ...

Dan presented Emma a dozen roses and dinner for two at the college pizzeria they had shared their first date at. She had a delightful time with her best friend and could almost forget that Bob and Alyx were sitting nearby on guard duty.

They returned to the castle by portkey early and finished their date in a way they never would have on their first one.

... --- ...

Diane was at the castle with Jack for Valentines Day. Jack was not a romantic at heart but this year he managed to surprise her with the perfect gift. She would spend the next week reading the journal that he had kept from the previous year.

They spent the night in front of the fireplace giving each other massages and feeding each other from the giant box of chocolates.

... --- ...

Susan, only slightly depressed, was making her rounds about the castle. She had volunteered to patrol this night since she was not dating anyone.

She frowned as she realized that one of the broom closets was occupied. She jerked open the door and watched as Anderson Condor and Allie Greystone tumbled to her feet. She sighed and shook her head.

“Uh Hi Susan,” Anderson said blushing.

“Hi yourself. You two having fun?” Susan asked as she watched Allie button her shirt.

“Well, yes actually we were,” he answered. Then he smirked, “Want to join us?”

Susan rolled her eyes and tapped her watch.

“It’s late. Why don’t you two get back to you common rooms? I’ll save the lecture for later,” Susan told them. The younger couple both nodded and straightened their robes.

She was surprised when they each took one of her hands and pulled her along with them. Anderson made some really bad jokes and Allie just laughed.

... --- ...

Remus and Tonks spent a quiet evening alone. He was recovering from a brutal night and she was recovering from working all night.

They enjoyed the company and the quiet. They retired early both glad to have someone to hold on the cold night. They would worry more about Harry in the morning.

... --- ...

Minerva McGonagall stood in the graveyard looking at the cold hard granite stone. She still missed him after all this time.

Edgar McGonagall 1920 - 1978

Son, Brother and Husband

Friend of the light

Lover of life

Death Eaters had killed her husband. They had never been identified. Minerva had never forgiven herself knowing that the transfiguration skills that had killed her beloved husband were ones that she taught.

Talking to Diane in the past months had done more for her than anything else she had tried. She placed a hand on the stone and said goodbye then apparated back to the castle.

In her office she found Lenny Folgard waiting for her. They left for dinner at the Three Broomsticks. He had asked her every year since 1990 and this was the first year she had accepted his invitation for dinner on February fourteenth.

The shock had almost killed him when she said yes. They had a wonderful time.

... --- ...

Neville and Luna were sharing the first of what she hoped was the many of dates. They were snuggled in greenhouse three surrounded

by flowers. Neville had worked for a long time to charm the violin to play for them. It wasn't as smooth or as beautiful as some could make it play. His deep singing voice as he serenaded her with muggle songs made up for it.

When he sang Amazing Grace Luna started to cry softly. When he finished she kissed him for the first time.

... --- ...

Harry and Hermione spent the night in Paris. They didn't see much of the city but for the view from their hotel room. They ordered room service and spent the remainder of the evening exhausting themselves.

They fell into a pleasant but deep sleep holding each other tightly. They each wore a tired but satisfied smile.

... --- ...

Riddle scowled as he thought of all of the lovers sharing the night tonight. He had not had good sex since Bella had been taken from him by the nasty muggle. He didn't think that raping a polyjuiced imposter of the muggle wife counted.

There were no female Death Eaters left. Riddle snarled at the young thing that Draco had kidnapped for him. 'Filthy muggle,' he thought as he approached the terrified young woman.

Draco watched his master approach the woman. Her terror lifted his spirits. That was until the Dark Lord pointed his wand at Malfoy's chest.

"Why would you think that I would want this filth? So you can watch?" Riddle demanded.

"Master, she is the best I could get. Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade were filled with Aurors," Draco said in fear.

“Crucio!” Riddle roared and Malfoy screamed as the curse hit him. It didn’t last long. Riddle bound him to the floor and stripped his robes. He tossed a knife at the woman’s feet and then released the ropes that bound her.

“Imperio,” he said. He made the woman pick up the kitchen knife and walk towards the young Death Eater. It didn’t take much effort to get her to play with Draco. His screams satisfied Riddle more than the muggle woman’s would have anyway.

When he was done with the muggle he wiped her memory and let her go. He was feeling generous tonight.

Draco wasn’t dead but he would always carry the message, I will not steal from my Master that had been carved into his chest with the knife. Voldemort left the mess for the other Death Eaters to clean up and heal.

... --- ...

March 1

Fred and George worked at a very steady pace in the back room of their shop while Lee minded the shop out front. Dan had found them diagrams of several different grenades and had explained how the fuses worked.

The fragment grenade was easy to make. It was the dust grenade that proved to be so difficult. In the end they ground the silver ingots that Bill had given them into different sized particles some as small as dust, some as large as birdshot. It was time consuming work and they went out into the countryside and tested several versions until they were satisfied with the result. Their normal joy of blowing things up was lost in the seriousness of their task.

... --- ...

Greyback met with Riddle at Avebury on March 6. The Feb full moon had netted him seven more children. Four of those taken had refused to join him and had been immediately killed. As such, the others

quickly agreed that joining Greyback was a great idea. In a week he would seek vengeance against the village of Hogsmeade. He had lived there as a boy and had been banished at the age of 14 after being bitten. Unable to complete school, he was a mediocre wizard at best, but a leader in his own right. Thirty years later he still had a bitter feeling toward every inhabitant of the village. In seven days he and his followers would kill every inhabitant of the village while Voldemort and his followers stripped it of its valuables.

Agreement of the plan in hand, they went their own separate ways.

Riddle clung to the belief that his enemies were getting stronger and to win he must quickly cause enough destruction to cause the Ministry to capitulate. He refused Malfoy's advice that they should leave the country and regroup. It was obvious to him that Lucius was a much better financial steward, and lacked any leadership or strategic skills.

... --- ...

March 8

"So how are you and Dan doing, Em?"

"Together? Better than in years. We're spending a lot of time together. Our wrists and backs don't ache every night. The food is excellent and someone else cooks, cleans and does the laundry." She smiled at her friend and continued saying, "Spending a few months in a thousand year old castle is something that I dreamed of as a little girl. I had no idea that I would ever get the opportunity. Do you still get the kids to take you out flying?"

Diane flashed a smile and replied, "Yes. I just love it. It's so much more fun than Jack's Triumph. Harry took him up and scared him witless. Where's Dan tonight?"

"Their sub-group meets at 8:00."

"Good. I'll bring Hermione by and we'll solve the world's problems or at least enjoy a bottle of wine and a warm fire together."

... --- ...

The testosterone level was high in anticipation of the battle against the werewolves. After the stunning success against the Inferi, the group's self confidence had risen to astonishing levels. In spite of the conversation that he'd just had with Hermione, Harry found himself enjoying the mood.

Aberforth volunteered to quietly pass the word amongst the villagers. They would need to have a sufficient number of people out on the street to appear that the village was unaware of the pending attack, yet be ready to get inside at a minute's notice.

Harry offered Tonks the opportunity to sit the potential battle out. She declined telling everyone that if she wasn't with the Order, she would be pulling guard duty at Avebury which was equally likely to be attacked.

Fred and George demonstrated how their grenades worked. They had developed two models – a silver model of a traditional fragment grenade with a five second fuse and a silver dust model which was equally lethal but would not kill instantly and was less likely to seriously injure a bystander.

Aberforth talked about the rebuilding effort going on in Hogsmeade. They had been greatly aided by loans that Bill had arranged with Gringotts. The Three Broomsticks and Honeydukes were reopened. Both had been rebuilt as brick buildings and were as fireproof as people could make them. Aberforth would arrange to have a group of villagers outside Honeydukes. He agreed to personally contact the Folgards who had the potential to be targets again in the event that any Death Eaters accompanied the werewolves.

Moody directed Alyx and the cadets to place two wards around an inner and outer perimeter of the village to alert them if the event that a werewolf had approached. Since there was the possibility of simultaneous attacks, they agreed to alert Abraxan after the scope of the attack was known. Moody would visit her and Thomas and

suggest that they keep a handful of Aurors and mediwitches in reserve to send to the area that was attacked at a moment's notice.

They agreed to meet back at the castle at 5PM on March 11. Fred and George put the box of grenades in the locked closet in Harry's room and wished him a good evening.

... --- ...

While Harry, Moody and the others in the fighting group were finalizing their best plan to put down a large pack of werewolves, Hermione was in tears talking with her mum and Diane. "What's wrong, Hermione?" asked Emma.

"I asked him to sit this battle out, and he wouldn't hear of it."

"What's so special about this one?" asked Diane, who thought she knew the answer.

Hermione took a breath and replied, "This isn't a fight-the-good-fight battle. They'll be fighting little kids who've been brainwashed. Even if our side wins with no losses, it will haunt them forever. From what Lisa's read, if the werewolves aren't killed instantly, they will revert back to their human form before death."

Diane shuddered at the thought of Harry shooting a wolf and having it turn into a bleeding seven-year-old child. She replied, "What would you have them do?"

"Give it to the Ministry, have the villagers fight, send in the Queen's army or the R.A.F. I don't know Mum. I'm so tired of this. I'm so scared. Lisa's been doing a lot of extra research and none of sounds good. The disease degenerates the mind over time. I don't know how Professor Lupin is even able to think properly. He should have turned into a full time hunter years ago."

"Maybe it's the medication that he's taken," replied Emma."

"Maybe, but the disease is in him every day. He only takes the Wolfsbane potion three days a month."

Getting back to the original line of conversation, Diane asked, "Suppose they're captured without being harmed. Then what? The magical world of Britain seems to be lacking when it comes to any social programs."

Hermione had to admit that there weren't any. As nonmagical beings, muggle werewolves had no standing within the wizarding world, and were classified as beasts. The nonmagical world had no facilities for them. They simply fell through the cracks.

Harry returned to their room two hours later to find Hermione wrapped up in a blanket. She was staring at the fire with a half empty bottle of Blue Nun and a glass by her side.

He sat down behind her and took her into his arms. Neither possessed the flowery words to cheer the other on that night. Taking a large sip of the wine, she handed Harry her glass and said, "I'll always love you."

Harry gave her a hug, emptied the glass and said, "Come to bed."

... --- ...

The morning of March 11 was cold and raining. By afternoon the clouds had moved on and the sun began drying things up. He didn't attend either of his classes that day; instead he spent the day with Moody who carefully examined each of the baseball sized grenades that the twins had created. The fragment grenades were round while the dust grenades were slightly larger and oval shaped for ease of identification in the dark.

The dust grenades were filled with particles about the diameter of beach sand. The twins had promised coverage of 25 feet in any direction of the detonation. They decided to fly at an elevation of about 200 feet. The twins had recommended holding the dust grenades for a second or two before dropping them so they would detonate just before hitting the ground.

At five everyone began assembling in the third floor area where Harry trained with Moody. Harry passed out two fragment and two dust grenades to each of the other eight flyers. He took two of the fragment grenades and an extra magazine for his pistol.

Moody, Kingsley and Hestia would be stationed at the south end of town across from Folgards. Harry, Lee, Fred, George, Hooch, and the four cadets would be in the air Tonks, Neville, Hagrid, Roger, Bill, and Lavender would be split between The Three Broomsticks, Honeydukes and the Hog's Head. Between the four buildings, the town was as protected as they could make it.

Moody, Kingsley and Hestia, left at 5:10 and the other ground groups left at five minute intervals. By 5:30 they were all in place.

... --- ...

At 6:00 Greyback activated the portkey that Voldemort had made for the werewolves. Moments later he and forty-one others landed at the edge of the forest near the Shrieking Shack. His plan was simple, moments after transforming they would split into three groups and attack the village beginning at Honeydukes. Many of the villagers were walking about and would be easy prey for the wolves which were incredibly quick. He estimated that within five minutes more than half of the villagers would be dead or have received the bite.

After the raid, they would meet back and spend the rest of the night in the safety of the forest. In the morning they would portkey back and Voldemort would deliver their half of the looted gold.

Meanwhile Draco would slip into Diagon Alley shortly after seven and fire off the Dark Mark as a diversion.

At 7:45 Voldemort, the Lucius and the two new recruits would quietly slip into Folgards, grab the gold and slip out. The two new recruits would kill as many villagers as possible then slip away moments later. Lucius would place a handful of villager under the Imperius curse then have them aid in the destruction of the village.

... --- ...

Stephen Bowser had never felt so powerful in his young life. The strength coursed through his veins as he made his way into the village. He could smell the young woman a half mile away as he silently made his approach. A few minutes later, he spotted her and with a leap knocked her down. At that moment he felt the blinding pain as the silver slug ripped into his chest. Seconds later, there were two children on the ground. One was terrified, but unharmed, the other dead. Harry scooped her up onto his broom and set her down outside Honeydukes where Lavender and her frantic parents took her in.

... --- ...

Minerva didn't need a messenger to tell her what was happening. She could hear the grenades going off from her office. She had sent all of the students to their common rooms. The healing group stood by the great oak doors quietly counting the blasts – one, five, fifteen, twenty-two.

Hermione could hear the pistol shots and could easily distinguish them from the grenade blasts. She heard two sets of two shots and three single shots a minute later. She heard two more grenade blasts and then nothing. Tears flooded her eyes. Susan and Emma held her hands as they waited in silence.

Minerva fire called the ministry and told them that they heard sounds indicating a large attack. Abraxan had already heard the news from Alyx who had left her cellular telephone on as instructed.

... --- ...

No one had been fooled by Draco's firing of the Dark Mark in Diagon alley. Unfortunately he hadn't been spotted and was able to get away cleanly after casting the Mark. The alley was deserted and all of the doors of the shops had been locked up tightly.

... --- ...

By the time Riddle and the three Death Eaters apparated into the village it was flooded with Aurors. Riddle got off a quick shot killing one of the villagers. A dozen blasts were returned hitting the two new Death Eaters. Riddle fired the Dark Mark and disappeared moments later with Lucius right behind him. An hour later Riddle and the Malfoys launched an attack on the Barclays branch by Avebury. Having received some guidance from the Romanian wizards that they'd recruited earlier, they made off with seventy five thousand pounds in banknotes.

... --- ...

Abraxan and Thomas walked around to survey the village immediately after they had received word that Voldemort and Malfoy had disappeared. She rounded up all of the Order members who had been on broomsticks and immediately brought them into the Three Broomsticks. On an individual basis she quietly asked them what had happened. Rosmerta gave each of them a Firewhisky or a butterbeer. Aside from the nine Order members, the pub was nearly full of villagers who had seen the werewolves and run in for safety or heard about what had happened. Meanwhile the Aurors began a physical inspection of the village.

Outside, Thomas and three others inspected the scene while the other Aurors maintained a perimeter. Thirty werewolves were dead, another twelve were expected to die within minutes either from wounds or massive amounts of silver ingestion. Thomas wished that he'd had a pistol like Mr. Potter to put down the mortally wounded. After two or three minutes, his wish was moot. Finrir had been shot four times along with three others. No charges would be filed. It was perfectly legal to kill a transformed werewolf that represented a clear and emanate danger to livestock or a person. Of the forty-two werewolves, thirty appeared to have been children under the age of ten.

Within the pub, there was no sympathy what-so-ever for the werewolves who were people 27 days a month. The other villagers remained locked inside their homes.

The Aurors confiscated all cameras and kept all of the press away from the village. The Aurors that were stationed at Avebury apparated to the village to help expand the perimeter. The Mediwitches were taken off stand-by alert. There would be no photos of naked dead ten year olds on the front page of the Daily Prophet. . Only Harry and Alyx and been low enough to realize who they had truly been fighting.

None of the children had any identification documents on their persons. Nor did many of the adults. Of the 42 killed, only 3 were identified before their bodies were levitated onto a giant pile of wood. John Thomas personally took photographs of each of the bodies so that they could be identified later. The muggle school children would be easy to identify with the help of the muggle authorities. Their parents deserved some measure of closure even if it would be a lie.

At 8:30 Abraxan walked Harry, Neville, Hooch, Fred, George Lavender and the Cadets back into the castle. Fred, George and Aberforth had decided to spend some time in the Hog's Head. The Aurors had hours of paperwork to do. After they had cleared the area, Thomas lit the fire.

Based on previous planning Abraxan had wisely directed Thomas to immediately remove the Order from the field of battle and left the tending of the dead and dying to the Ministry Aurors. They all had protective gear on to avoid any contact with the contaminated blood. The Order was all gone before the fire had been started. It was an imperfect solution, but one that she was very willing to accept – most of the Order hadn't seen the final results of their work, the werewolf threat was eliminated, none of Thomas' Aurors had been killed and the village had been saved.

... --- ...

Hermione became increasingly frantic as the minutes passed. Finally she could see them walking up the castle lawn. McGonagall insisted that they wait inside much to their loved ones' displeasure. The flyers were immediately walked into the hospital wing where Poppy had them remove their gear and made certain that they hadn't been cut or splattered with blood. She had the house-elves carefully wash and return the basilisk battle armor to their respective rooms and bring

them each a change of clothing while the others waited outside. Fred and George collected all of the unused grenades and following Hermione's previous instructions, vanished them before they could get into inappropriate hands.

Abraxan called all of the other Order members to a meeting in the hospital wing. Dan, Emma, Diane and the witches and wizards of the Order stood together in the wide walkway between the beds. There was silence in the room until she spoke. "I asked you to meet here tonight to remind you that your healing team was prepared to accommodate up to a hundred injured this evening." They had extra blood replenishing potions on hand, piles of bandages neatly arranged, and were prepared to attempt a rather complicated blood exchange ritual in the event that any of you had been bitten."

No one said a word as she spoke. "As you can see, the beds are empty. There was no saving the werewolves once they had attacked a human. Through the efforts of the Weasleys, the research group, and your fighting group, the threat that had been Finrir Greyback and his followers was completely destroyed. The only loss of life was one villager who was killed by Tom Riddle himself.

She continued, "No one is pleased that it became absolutely necessary to take the lives of werewolves that were set on destroying the village and murdering all of the inhabitants. Without your help and careful planning those villagers that might have managed to survive the actual attack would have been doomed to become werewolves themselves." She looked at each of them, making eye contact whenever possible. "Not everyone who becomes a werewolf makes the choice to become a killer. Your own Remus Lupin chooses to live a highly responsible and productive life. Greyback and his followers made decisions to become killers."

Diane could see that Abraxan's words were having little impact, but was glad that the ministry official was making a real effort to help. Abraxan had wisely kept Thomas away from the castle for the evening, knowing that he was more likely to say something inappropriate than help given the circumstances."

... --- ...

Diane and the Grangers listened to enough of the accounts to get a clear idea of the battle and what had taken place, Harry had searched exclusively for Greyback, quickly located him and put him down. At that point the other werewolves seemed to have lost focus and became easy targets. Lavender, Fred, George, and Gunner had used all of their grenades. Neville and Alyx had thrown their dust grenades while Chambers had thrown one of the fragment grenades. The fragment grenades were quite effective in stopping the attacks, but it was the dust grenades that ultimately killed most of the werewolves.

After the meeting, they walked back to Harry and Hermione's room. They sat in silence for an hour as Harry and Hermione sat on the floor in front of the loveseat by the fire. They wept in each other's arms. Dan quietly cleaned the pistol and put it away in the locked cabinet, noting that it had been fired seven times and realizing the implications. Diane quietly led Dan and Emma back to their own suite. She had a lot of work ahead of her.

... --- ...

The next day, Minerva interrupted the noon meal and announced, "The residents of Hogsmeade are out on the front lawn and would like to have a word with us. Afternoon classes are cancelled." Emily Folgard walked out with Harry and Hermione as everyone made their way outdoors.

Many of the villagers were carrying signs that said Thank You. Rosmerta spoke for the villagers. "Many of you may know that the village was attacked by Voldemort and his followers last night. The Auror Cadets, Aberforth and some of his friends from the castle had warned us in advance. Mrs. Lighthouse was the only casualty. While we will all miss Susan, the other six hundred and forty-three of us are ever so grateful to those of you that chose to save us. Connie and Sandy Honeyduke made some extra-special treats and we brought some butterbeers to help say thank you from the bottom of our hearts."

Honeyduke's ten-year-old daughter pointed Harry out and said, "That's him, Mum. That's the man who saved me." Abraxan went over

and visited with them, knowing that Harry wasn't looking for any extra attention, but wanting to hear her story.

Little Emily Folgard had seen her sisters Kris and Mary and her dad in the crowd. She dragged Harry, Hermione and Alyx over. There were hugs all around. Lenny Folgard beamed at them. "Hello Hermione, hello Harry. It's good to see you again."

Hermione replied, "Hi Lenny. These are my parents Dan and Emma Granger and their friend Diane."

Lenny greeted them and related the different times that Harry and the Order had saved their village. He was a wonderful storyteller who could make putting on a pair of shoes sound like a fascinating event. Minerva stood a few feet away smiling as she listened to them.

The students and the villagers visited for an hour on the sunny afternoon getting to know each other better and eating the delicious sweets. For Lavender, Neville and some of the other flyers from last night it brought a different slant on the previous nights events. Six hundred and forty three people knew them to be heros. It was just the affirmation that they needed. Luna had lost her faraway look and appeared to be glued to Neville while Seamus and Lavender never left each other's side.

Abraxan found Diane and explained that none of the villagers had seen the werewolves after they had transformed back into human form. As far as she knew, only Thomas, Alyx and Harry knew that most of them had been children. The three Aurors who'd had cleanup duty were having their memory of the event modified that afternoon

Diane asked, "How many of the werewolves had been shot?"

"Five, Greyback, Becker and three unidentified children."

Abraxan asked, "What can we do to help?"

Diane replied, "Find a way to end this."

... --- ...

Chapter 26

... --- ...

The April 1 Order meeting included a birthday celebration for the twins. Harry delighted everyone with a replay of his Pensieve memory of the twins escaping Umbridge fifth year complete with fireworks and images of Filch punting students across the portable swamp. McGonagall silently noted the students in the memory who had subsequently been killed, delighted to see the images again but saddened that they had been taken away.

Hermione tallied the Order Members who could reliably perform the Patronus charm at thirty-four. She wanted at least a hundred people. Within the DA there were another twenty. She knew that she would need help from the Aurors and others.

The next evening she went to Hogsmeade and visited the Folgards. She knocked on his door not certain if he'd remember her. When he answered she said, "Mr. Folgard, I'm Hermione Granger a friend of Harry and Alyx."

"Of course, we met a month ago. Please call me Lenny. How can I help you?"

"I need at least fifty people who can cast or be taught to cast a Patronus charm. I need you to quietly find some people."

Lenny was happy to help, but didn't understand the reason. "But why? The dementors were banished back to the island."

"I'm afraid I can't be more specific at this time."

Lenny considered her request for a moment and realized the unspoken but implied danger. He replied, "Let me ask you one question Hermione. How certain are you that your plan will work?"

"I'm all but positive, Sir."

“That’s good enough for me. I’ll find them for you. When will you return?”

“In a week.”

The next evening she had the same conversation with the Minister of Magic. The Minister pledged the same level of co-operation. That left her with four problems.

How to get Voldemort to a set location accompanied by as few Death Eaters as possible

How to keep Harry alive long enough to tire Voldemort out

How to keep Voldemort from escaping

How to get a hundred witches and wizards into exactly the right spot at the right time

She would call a meeting of the research team to come up with ideas.

... --- ...

Eight evenings later in the third floor corridor Harry looked out at the sea of faces crammed together sitting in rows of chairs. He saw students, professors, merchants, administrators, a few hit-wizards, the Minister of Magic and quite a few aurors in the crowd. They were a diverse group sharing two things in common. They believed that they could produce a Patronus charm and they had faith in Harry Potter.

Abraxan spoke for a moment. “Good evening. Thank you for coming this evening. You may soon be in a position to help make a real difference in this war. I turn the rest of the meeting over to Mr. Harry Potter. Mr. Potter has done much to turn the tide of the war in our favor and has my complete confidence. I ask that you give him your fullest attention.”

Harry was embarrassed by her words, but got along. He said, “Good evening. We’re here tonight to practice our spell work. I’d like you to

think of your happiest memory involving the love of another person. It could be of your parents, children, husband, wife, boyfriend, girlfriend or whatever. Go ahead and cast your spell.”

Of the 125 people there, less than half could cast a fully formed patronus. Harry was disappointed, but not really surprised. It was an amazingly difficult spell and he’d asked for a specific type of memory.

Tonks, Alyx and Remus helped Harry divide the people into four groups and they helped assess the skill level. Harry took the group of people that hadn’t been able to cast the spell as requested. In some cases they could, but not with the memories that Harry had requested. In other cases they simply couldn’t reliably cast the spell.

Alyx and her group had the best success. By the end of the meeting everyone in her group could get at least a mass of silver gas to escape from their wand. She smiled as Bob Sunset’s Patronus form looked like a mutt dog. She hoped that his happy memory was of her.

... --- ...

The various P teams as they became known met once every four days on a rotating schedule. By the end of April almost everyone could reliably produce a form. Professor Flitwick began demonstrating how to direct a form

They only practiced the charm, but were never told the reason why or the circumstances whereby they would be called upon to cast the spell.

Pleased with the progress, Harry and Hermione crossed one problem off their list.

... --- ...

After the meeting, Remus held Harry back while Tonks went to talk with Hermione. Each was about to have a very uncomfortable conversation.

Remus stopped Harry and asked, "Cub can we talk for a few minutes?"

Harry was dreading the admonishment that was coming, but knew that he had to hear it for the two of them to move on. He replied, "Have a seat."

Remus began, "Harry, I know that going after Greyback was the hardest decision of your life, but it was..."

Harry shook him off and replied, "Going after Greyback was the easiest decision of my life. Killing those little kids was..."

The only thing to do. He gave them a death sentence Harry. You just eased their pain. He was the werewolf who bit me..." Remus took a steadying breath and said, "I just wanted to say thanks for ending it."

"Remus you're not like them. Minister Abraxan specifically mentioned you when she talked with us after..."

"The attack?"

Harry nodded.

Remus felt so bad for Harry and the pain that he was carrying around that was eating away at him. He asked, "Why didn't you tell me what you were planning to do? I wouldn't have objected."

"I couldn't. It was too..."

Remus stopped him before he sunk any further saying, "You don't need to say anything. I've seen what happens. This doesn't change anything between us. We're still square Harry."

... --- ...

Lenny Folgard was surprised at the increase in British pound to galleon conversions that had taken place in the last month. Typically he dealt in galleon to muggle currency conversions as wizards or witches prepared to go on holiday in some other country. Lately he

had seen them go the other way. Several of the transactions had been substantial.

Enjoying the five percent commissions he smiled that good fortune had returned for him and his family.

... --- ...

"It's your move Harry," said Neville who had lost most of his pieces. After a minute Harry still hadn't moved, seemingly lost in thought. Neville tried again. "Harry? It's getting late. Maybe we should finish another time."

"I'm sorry Neville. I was just thinking back to something the Professor had told me about being ready."

"Harry, do you remember my Uncle Algie? He had a younger brother Sydney who was killed on Sword beach at Normandy. Before he went he'd sent Algie a letter asking him not to grieve for him in the event that he was killed. It was something that he felt needed to be done and he was proud to serve."

Harry nodded as he listened, admiring the man that Neville had become.

"Just like those leaders you're getting ready to send us to war. The difference is those men were sent by people who rarely got their hands dirty. You're leading us and we're willing to follow you. One in six who went ashore that morning was killed before noon. They made the way safer for those who followed. Maybe we'll do better, maybe not, but we'll win because we have faith in you."

"That's the problem, Neville. I don't want anyone to die."

"It's war, Harry. You've spent a lot of gold giving us good equipment, and we've trained hard. What else would you have us get or learn? We're ready."

Unfortunately, Harry couldn't think of anything. In a month they would throw the ball into play and see what happens. They just had one more problem to work out.

...---...

Monday May 11

The Daily Prophet editor had apparently been obliterated of the memory of waking up naked while hanging in the doorway of his office. George nearly blew up their shop as he was reading the Daily Prophet.

The Chosen One to Raid Azkaban

By Reggie McDonald

The Daily Prophet has learned that Harry Potter, a.k.a. The Chosen One has been building a team to storm Azkaban Island. He has been meeting with a great number of people to practice the Patronus charm. There is only one reason to practice the Patronus charm; to have an effect on the Dementor population that is living at Azkaban Island.

The reason behind this raid is unknown. Potter obviously either plans to control the Dementors to his own end or to kill the whole of them off. Either of these schemes is outrageous and should not be tolerated.

Having one person controlling the Dementors is a dangerous proposition. Imagine what Potter can do if he wished. Attacks on people who dare to disagree with him or even attacks on towns are possible.

Killing all of the Dementors would be a horrible atrocity. The Dementor Population is currently living in peace with the Wizarding world. To systematically kill them is nothing short of murder.

At each of the next group meetings Moody checked the left arm of every participant as they signed an oath of silence. If they broke it

they would have much more to worry about than the word sneak appearing on their face.

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Wed May 20

Hermione spent hours with Flitwick and Dumbledore's portrait viewing Harry's infant memory of Voldemort attacking Harry's parents and him. They concluded that the spell that Lily cast to protect him must have been a shielding charm that lingered after her death. They were inconclusive as to which spell she had actually used.

After seeing Lily Potter murdered repeatedly Hermione left the Head office and set off to find her mum. She, Susan and Emma attended Wednesday evening service at the Granger's church in Crawley. Afterward they visited the other members for a bit. Hermione was not as talkative as usual. She couldn't get Lily's screams out of her head.

She vowed that she would double her efforts to stop the monster that called himself Voldemort.

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Friday May 22

Susan missed Hannah so much. She had asked Hermione for permission to borrow her pensive. Hermione was working on a project and needed it but retrieved Harry's for Susan to use. She carefully withdrew a long silvery strand from her memory and carefully placed it in the dish. She tapped the rune on the pensive like Harry had done. Unfortunately the wrong memory began. It was Harry and Cedric in the maze grabbing the cup that someone had turned into a portkey.

Susan watched the scene for a moment mesmerized. A thought flickered across her mind and she stood up quickly. She closed the memory and ran as fast as she could to the library.

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Monday June 1

Riddle outlined his plan to lure Potter away from the castle and ambush him. Lucius, Draco and the handful of newly minted Death Eaters nodded in genuine agreement. Afterward, the two Malfoys left to have dinner together.

"This will be a deciding battle for us Draco. Should the Dark Lord defeat Potter the dark forces will instantly rally around him and we will regain true leadership positions. To truly succeed in his organization you must harness your anger and use it to power you, not lead you."

"Potter will pay for what he did to me."

Lucius knew better than to get dragged into an unwinnable argument and tried to put it to rest. "Harry Potter did not take away your manhood Draco. Someone else did. You must focus on the future and the mission at hand. Right now we must help the Dark Lord get Potter out of the castle."

Draco had every confidence in the outcome but knew that his father had brought him here to discuss all of the likely outcomes. Lucius continued, "Should the Dark Lord fall we will use the portkeys and meet in Bucharest at midnight the next evening."

"Surely you don't think Potter is a match for the Dark Lord?"

"Draco, even you can't ignore the fact that Potter has faced the Dark Lord at least five times and still breathes. He may have had luck or help on his side but no other man, alive or dead, can make the same claim. One way or another we will regain our place of greatness within wizarding society."

Lucius didn't tell his son that he had already started his contingency plans for when the Dark Lord fell. He didn't want to know what Riddle would do to him if he found out that his faith and loyalty were gone. Lucius just hoped that his spy had not blown anything by using the Daily Prophet to communicate.

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As Riddle was revealing his plot to murder Harry, the Order was finalizing their plans and the respective responsibilities of the individuals. Hermione believed that she had done everything that she could to engineer out the risks but knew that people would die in spite of her best efforts.

She handed the large sack of galleons that Harry had given her to McGonagall who insisted on handling the transfigurations personally.

Bill and Moody agreed to go look the site over the next day and give the final location to Flitwick.

Harry had avoided making any speeches regarding the worthiness of their cause. He was concerned what Riddle's reaction to the newspaper article had been.

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Tuesday June 2

Dan woke from a dead sleep in an instant. It didn't take him long to figure out why. Next to him Emma was sobbing while she slept. He slid up behind her and pulled her close. He began to say anything he could think of to comfort her. Ineffectual and useless were the words he would use to describe how he felt.

This was not the first nightmare she had suffered recently. They seemed to be getting progressively worse. Her dream journal was loaded with very dark and progressively more frightening images. They had discussed all but one of them. Dan couldn't bring himself to broach the subject of the last one. Emma never mentioned it either.

After her weeping turned to whimpering and eventually subsided she woke up. She sat up for a moment and looked around. Dan knew she was clearing her head of the memory of the dream. After a second she lay back down and snuggled against him.

Breakfast came and went before either of them spoke. Finally Emma had to move to please her bladder. She came back to find Dan sitting on the edge of the bed with his face in his hands. She sat behind him and returned the favor of holding him tightly.

They had no classes until after lunch. Emma asked Jonie the house elf to bring them a light breakfast. Neither of them was ready to face the day.

After eating and showering Emma put on a pants suit that she normally wore to the surgery. She was one of the Muggle Studies Professors and she was going to dress like it today. Dan raised an eyebrow at her rebellion of the dress code and then changed his clothes. Strength in numbers was a good motto he decided.

Emma found herself in front of the fireplace once again. She had been spending a lot of time staring at the flames. It was a good place to think or to brood. Dan plopped down next to her and took her hand.

“What’s on your mind, love?” he asked.

She desperately wanted to answer ‘nothing’ but could tell Dan was through taking that for an answer. She sighed and leaned sideways into his shoulder.

“I’ve been playing Diane’s what if game in my head,” she answered. Her husband was intrigued having expected an answer about the nightmare.

“Like what?”

“What if Hermione, Harry and Susan all die?” she responded sullenly.

Dan flinched. He took a deep breath and then swallowed hard. His voice wouldn’t work.

“I told Hermione that I would have trouble accepting her in a battle. I would. I do. This war is likely to end in a few days. All three of our children are going to be there. I’m terrified something is going to happen and they are all going to come home in body bags,” Emma

told him. It was the first time she had said it out loud. She didn't like the sound of the words.

"So am I," Dan admitted choking on the words.

"Oh Dan," she whispered as she started to cry. He held her tightly but could not comfort her. He had matching tracks of wetness on his face.

"All we can do is pray that they will come through this," he said when she had calmed down.

"That's what I hate. We're the parents. We're supposed to protect them. We can't do a damn bloody thing," Emma said sniffing. Dan gave her his handkerchief.

"We have done everything we can Em. In this last battle there won't be any muggle tricks to destroy an army. My pistol is worthless. All we can do is wait and pray."

"I feel useless," Emma confessed.

"Me too. Our part is not in the battle though. We've done our best to show all three of them how much we love them. It's strange. I love Susan and Harry as much as I do Hermione," Dan told his wife. She held up her right hand and the light glittered off the stones.

"So do I. It's different but the same. I don't think I could stand losing any of them."

"They're going to be okay. I believe that with all my heart. If I didn't I would lose my mind," he said softly.

They were both quiet for a while watching the fire. Then Emma spoke, "I had the dream again."

The dream. The one neither of them could bear to speak out loud.

"The same as before?" He asked not wanting to know but needed to.

"Yes."

“Do you think it means something?” He asked hesitantly.

“I went to the library...” Dan chuckled. Hermione was her mother’s daughter. Emma gave him a look of reproach and then continued, “There have been no true muggle seerers. I don’t know if that is a conclusion of the hatred in this world or if it is accurate.”

“It was just a dream, Em,” He said firmly.

“Do you believe that or do you just want to believe it?” She asked. He wished he could be offended by the remark but she had a very good point. It was not a valid one though.

“You’ve admitted that you are afraid of your children dying. That is why you are having nightmares about their funerals,” Dan kissed her temple feeling her shiver at his words. Then he asked, “Have you talked with Diane?”

“No.”

“She may have some insight,” Dan pointed out. Emma shook her head.

“I’m sure you’re right. That doesn’t make it any easier,” she said sniffing.

They were still holding on to each other when Susan stopped by to see them. Concerned that they had missed breakfast she wanted to be sure they were okay. She joined them on the couch without saying a word and felt her heart melt when they both took her in their arms. ‘This was so much better than Slughorn’s potions class,’ Susan decided.

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Thursday June 4

It was late in the afternoon when Harry found himself walking past the stone gargoyles on his way to McGonagall’s office. He walked in and

just sat down. Jonie the house elf brought him several bottles of butterbeer.

After a minute of sitting in silence, Dumbledore's portrait said, "Good afternoon Harry."

"Hello Professor."

After a minute of small talk Harry asked, "Professor how did you know that you were ready to face Grindelwald?"

"I suspected that we would have this conversation some day, Harry. I knew I was ready to face him when I believed that I had found the opportunity to physically get to him and when I'd developed a plan on how to kill him. Interestingly enough, I had gotten the idea from a soldier that I'd met who had been stationed near the castle."

Harry said nothing and Dumbledore continued. "In your case, I take it that you believe you have such a plan."

"Yes sir," Harry replied. He elaborated the basics of the plan to the portrait.

Dumbledore considered the plan for a minute, found it to be sound and asked, "How do you plan on fighting with him?"

Dodging his curses mostly. Hermione thinks that with such a small piece of his soul remaining, he'll tire pretty quickly, hopefully faster than when you dueled with him at the Ministry.

McGonagall, who had come in a minute earlier, added that the other people who were there would all have shields so they could deflect any curses that came their way.

Harry asked, "Like the ones that we made in class?"

McGonagall nodded and replied, "They're big enough to protect and small enough to safely deflect the blasts."

Harry got up to leave, then hesitated.

Minerva half expected that he hadn't come to see the portrait and asked, "What is it, Harry?"

Harry glanced at the portrait frame which was now empty, relaxed and said, "Professor, if something goes wrong, can you give these to the people marked on the envelopes?" He was holding a thick envelope that obviously contained a number of smaller envelopes.

Minerva looked at him sadly and was about to admonish him for thinking negatively and realized that he was simply being a realist, knowing that he was the bravest man that she had ever met. Instead, she took the envelope and said, "I'll keep these for you until you're ready to come back and collect them. She walked over to him and hugged him saying, "I wish you the very best, Harry."

Harry replied, "Thank you Professor... For everything." Her met her eyes and noticed that both of them were a moment from choking up.

She nodded, unable to speak, and he left.

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Emma was still feeling quite apprehensive and contemplative. She stared into the fire as she sat with Dan's arms around her. Across from her Diane and Jack were watching their friends. For the past hour the four of them had been sitting by the fire in the Grangers quarters. Occasionally one of them would speak but the conversations were short.

Emma had been thinking of what if scenarios for a couple of hours. Not all of her thoughts were nice and that left her feeling like a bad person.

When Hermione was ten she had asked her parents for permission to apply to a few independent schools, boarding schools and special programs. Not seeing the harm they had agreed. Both Dan and Emma were realistic in their view of their very bright daughter. Two days later Hermione had stayed up all night filling out forms and

writing essays. Within a week she had applications to fifteen Premier League schools and ten First Division schools.

To the shock of her parents she was accepted at all twenty-five of the schools and all four of the special study programs that she had applied to. Of course they knew that their daughter was bright. But her maturity level had always seemed to hold her back. She had always excelled at chemistry and mathematics. Emma knew that her daughter's interest was in medical research. She swore that she would one day find the cure for the Alzheimer's disease that had destroyed her beloved grandmother.

Then came the Hogwarts letter.

Almost instantly Hermione had forgotten all about Premier League schools and Kings College Medical School. She finally knew what it was that set her apart from the children she went to school with. She was a witch. A new world opened up for her and Emma knew the moment that Professor McGonagall had shown them magic was real that Hermione would never be happy unless she went to Hogwarts.

At the moment Emma was contemplating time manipulation. She had heard the story of Harry and Hermione saving Sirius Black with the use of a time turner. She knew logically that her thoughts were ridiculous but she wanted a time turner. She wanted to go back to the moment she decided that Hermione would be better off at Hogwarts.

Emma was feeling very selfish. She wanted to change that decision. She wanted her daughter to be a student at St. Paul's, Sevenoaks or City of London School for Girls. Emma wanted her daughter to be away from this war and all of the death. At the moment Emma couldn't care less about what the effect on the wizarding world would be if it had never known Hermione Granger. She didn't want to consider that she would not know Harry and Susan whom she loved like her own.

At the sound of the knock on the door Diane and Emma's eyes met. Diane probably knew what she was thinking. On most days she could figure it out. Diane could tell her friend didn't want to move from the

arms of her best friend so she rose. Jack gave her a gentle push back into her seat and went to answer it himself.

"Hello Harry, how are you?" Dan asked from his seat behind Emma. She smiled at the young man. Harry was a bright spot in Hermione's life. She didn't want to think about what would have happened to him if her daughter had not come to Hogwarts.

"I'm fine," Harry answered looking around the room. He seemed a bit nervous. Emma at first thought it was Jack's presence but then decided it was something more.

"What can we do for you?" Emma asked him. She watched Harry pace a few steps and then stop.

When Harry said he needed to talk to them the Turnbull's stood to leave but Harry stopped them. He gave Jack a nervous smile.

"You're the one who said you should be here," Harry told the Inspector. Jack was confused for a moment and then he smiled.

"Really?" Jack asked him. Harry nodded and Jack laughed and pulled Diane back on to the love seat. Harry began to pace again.

"I don't... Blimey, this is harder than I thought it would be," Harry told them.

"What is it Harry? Is something wrong?" Dan asked.

Harry muttered something about saying no and then spoke up, "No, not really. I just... I had a big speech planned and can't remember any of it."

"Speech?" Diane asked. Harry continued to pace until he finally just muttered a curse word and then took a deep breath to steady himself. He closed his eyes and then opened them to see the Grangers looking at him in concern.

"Dr. Granger," he began. He stopped and breathed again. Emma felt the tension in Dan change at the use of their shared title. Harry

continued speaking clearly and slowly as if the words had to be right, "I am madly in love with your daughter and I want your permission to ask her to marry me," He said. Emma didn't miss that he was looking at her as he spoke. She patted Dan's leg as she slowly stood up.

Instead of answering Emma walked over to the nervous teenager. She gave him a quick hug and then kissed his cheek.

"I think that is a lovely idea," she told him.

"I know we are young, too young and I know that I said I would wait until we were out of school but in a couple of days... er, wait, lovely?" Harry rambled.

"You make her happy. That's all I care about," Emma said.

Harry looked over at Dan who had not spoken. His golfing buddy and friend looked up at him and stared hard. Then he nodded and grinned.

"I couldn't ask for a better man for my daughter," he said.

Harry let out the long breath he was holding and Diane chuckled. He glanced at Hermione's Godparents. Diane was smiling but Jack looked menacing. Harry swallowed hard as the man glared at him.

"This is so unfair. I had to jump through hoops of fire and Dan had to face a mad man who owned a gun and you, ya little snot, get their blessing without Granger over there making even one of his horrible jokes," Jack said in snappish voice.

"Well Jack, I guess life's not always fair. Dan has a pistol too you know, I just like to think I'm smart enough to have asked him when Emma was sitting on him. Plenty of time to get away," Harry said solemnly. He offered Jack his hand and they both laughed.

"He's a keeper," Diane told Emma who smirked then she glared at Jack.

“A madman with a gun?” she asked Jack. He snorted. Dan ignored them and approached Harry. They shook hands and then shared a manly hug.

“When are you going to ask her?” Emma asked after she managed to make Jack shrink playfully behind Diane.

“I’m not sure but I have the perfect place picked out,” he said with a grin.

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Friday June 5

Moody had reviewed every aspect of the plan and could find no flaw with the second half of it. It was the first half that worried him. He limped past the Hogwarts coat of arms on the way to the third floor corridor and read the words *Draco Dormiens Nunquam Titillandus* – Never tickle a sleeping dragon. It felt like that was exactly what they were about to do.

He was reminded of a group of his friends who had the saying, “Beware of the dragon, for you are crunchy and good with ketchup.”

Potter’s plan was sound but still the Master Auror worried over the fine details. He hoped that the light side wouldn’t simply crumble in one day.

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Hermione finished her shepherd’s pie and watched Rosmerta summon the empty plate. A second later it had been replaced by a huge slice of apple pie. Harry grinned as he took a bite and then returned to his own desert of pudding.

After they finished eating they slipped from the building hand in hand. Time alone was something scarce. Now that the plan was in place and everything was set they just had to wait.

As they walked through the town many of the residents stopped them for a moment. Harry had noticed that Hermione was quieter than normal. He had a feeling he knew what she was thinking. She kept glancing at him and tears would well in her eyes.

He led her to the gate outside of the Shrieking Shack and conjured a blanket for them to sit on. It was getting dark but they sat anyway. Hermione threw up a few wards and a couple privacy charms. They each sat down. Hermione sat with her knees pulled up against her chest and her arms wrapped around her legs.

That is a defensive position, Harry thought. He almost smirked thinking that he had been around Diane too much.

"In a couple weeks the war will be over," Harry mused out loud as he looked up at the slowly darkening night sky.

"Yes," she said softly.

"I want to talk about what comes next," he told her. She swallowed hard and rocked slightly.

"I've been thinking about that too," she said with a sigh.

"You have?" He was surprised. Hermione almost rolled her eyes.

"Of course I have. This is the moment we have been working for since we were ickle firsties and Voldemort was possessing our first awful defense teacher. What comes next? Do we get happily ever after or not?" Hermione asked. He shivered slightly and then reached for her hand.

"I'm not afraid to die. Dumbledore once told me that it's just a passage to the next great adventure. You know how I like an adventure," Harry said with a sad look. He continued before she could reply. "There are many outcomes, love. Happily ever after would be both of us living and Voldemort dead. But what if..." he said. She pulled her hands away not wanting to play Diane's hypothetical game but knowing that they must.

“What if you die after you manage to kill that bastard? Am I supposed to just go move with my life?” Hermione asked.

“You must Hermione,” he said simply.

“I must? I don’t want to think about spending the next hundred and twenty-five years without you Harry. That is a lot of days to wake up alone,” she told him.

“Moving on means finding someone new. You wouldn’t have to be alone,” he told her his heart aching at the thought.

“I don’t want anyone else Harry. Alone would be preferable,” she said with a sigh. She expected him to argue and was surprised when he didn’t.

“I know what you mean. What if you die and I live? I wouldn’t want to be with anyone else either,” Harry said softly.

“I’m not afraid to die either Harry. We’ve lost so much, so many. I know they are waiting for us. If I die you would need to move on. I wouldn’t want you to be alone Harry,” Hermione said seriously.

“I want us both to live. It kills me to think of you with someone else.”

“What if... I can’t promise that I will move on and be happy. I promise I won’t wallow in guilt that I couldn’t protect you. I will make sure the whole bloody world knows about Harry Potter and not the boy-who-lived,” she told him.

“I don’t even want to think what my life would be like without you. But if the worst happens and you are gone I will make sure that the world knows what it is missing with the death of the cleverest witch of our age,” Harry promised.

They were quiet for a few moments then Hermione laughed a little. Harry looked at her in concern.

"While we are being morbid I guess I should tell you that I took your advice and made out a will. I don't have anything to leave anyone," she said still wondering why he had insisted that she do it.

"If I die you will have. I left you half of my net worth," he told her.

"I don't want your money," she snapped.

"I know that... But you are the best person I know to use it wisely. I know people, myself included, thought that S.P.E.W. was an insane idea. But it's not really. You have a great heart and a wonderful mind. No matter what happens to me I would want you to use my bloody fortune to change things... To make them better," he said.

"And if we both die my parents are going to be very rich," Hermione said with a sigh.

"Neither of them would want that. I guess we'll just have to live. I'd hate to see your Mum disappointed," Harry told her. She felt the smile tug at her mouth and leaned over and kissed him.

They sat quietly looking at the darkened sky until it was time for them to return to the castle. They were still the head boy and girl and it was their turn to do rounds.

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Hermione followed Harry into the girl's loo with a roll of her eyes. They had checked out every inch of private space in the castle tonight and shared some really nice snogs. She was dying to get back to their rooms and show Harry what his little game of teasing had done to her.

She watched him shut the door and seal it. He smirked.

"That's not the first time I have locked that door," he told her.

"Oh, so you locked me in with the troll," she teased him. He grinned. Harry and Ron had spent years shifting the actual locking of the door back and forth.

"You never know," he said with a smirk. He led her to a certain spot and then gave her a short kiss. He said, "Do you realize we're standing in the spot that our friendship began?"

She looked around and then grinned at him. She answered, "I guess we are."

They stood there and snogged for quite a while. Harry had to force himself to stop. He pulled away and looked her in the eyes as they caught their breath. Then he spoke, "You know about six and a half years ago you stood right here and lied to Professor McGonagall to save Ron and me from her wrath. I hate to think what she would have done to us if she found out the reason you were in here crying was because we were a couple of prats... shhh... let me finish before you say something, love. You were quite snotty but we shouldn't have been making fun of you. You used to drive us both crazy. But we eventually learned that you weren't so bad and you learned to loosen up a bit."

Knowing he was not one to make sentimental speeches, she gave him a slightly puzzled look.

Harry continued, "Right here on this spot is where you covered my ass for the first time. Where I discovered that, to my shock, Hermione Granger could lie. Not real well mind you, but she could do it. It was a completely crazy moment and from then on we have been friends. Sure there were times when we argued. Times when I thought my broom or that damn book were more important. You still had your moments too. I thought you were going to kill us all during OWLs and I still can't believe that you hid your feelings from me for so long. But even through all of the stuff thrown at us over the years we're still friends. Best friends."

She wasn't certain where he was going, but loved the ride and smiled at him.

"I love you Hermione. Everyday I think I can't possibly love you more and then next morning I am proven wrong. I want you to prove me

wrong for the rest of our lives,” he said softly as he dropped to one knee. Hermione gasped as he took out a ring box and opened it.

“Oh my god,” she uttered.

“Hermione Jane will you do something completely crazy again and make me the happiest man on the planet? Will you marry me?” he asked. This was definitely harder than asking her parents for permission.

Hermione stood perfectly still, stunned for a moment and then she spoke, “Harry, I want nothing more than to spend the next hundred years with you.”

He fumbled with the ring and slipped it over her finger. She looked at it closely. It was a platinum band with an elegant but not gaudy diamond on it. On each side of the diamond was a smaller sapphire stone. Outside of each sapphire was an emerald.

“If you don’t like it we can pick out anything that you want. I just saw it and thought of you,” he said hurriedly.

“It’s perfect,” she told him as he stood up.

“Just like you,” he said leaning in to kiss her. She melted into him and they kissed in the spot that their friendship began for a long moment. Then she pulled back and looked at him.

“I love you,” she told him. He was not able to do anything but smile until his grin turned wicked. He picked her up in his arms and swung her around.

“She said yes!” he shouted to the gods. She shrieked and giggled and then settled for kissing him.

“Of course I did you silly man. I’ve been waiting for this moment since I was three,” she said. He laughed loudly and shouted again.

They were snogging deeply and neither of them noticed the spell being removed from the door or it opening. When a familiar throat

cleared they jumped apart. Professor McGonagall said, "Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, I assumed that as the head students you knew the rules of decency. Perhaps I need to explain them to you?"

"Uh no ma'am. I mean yes ma'am, I mean..." Harry said desperately trying not to laugh. Hermione slipped her left hand into her cloak and took a deep breath.

"We understand the rules of decency Professor. We were just checking to make sure no one was breaking them," she lied. She heard Harry choke on his laughter and start coughing to cover it.

Professor Minerva McGonagall, head Mistress of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry looked over her head students with a stern frown. Then her scowl broke and she shook her head.

"Miss Granger, after all these years you are still a terrible liar. I'm just glad to see you both so happy. I dare say that next time you feel the need to shout you can use a silencing spell on the door Mr. Potter. I almost had a heart attack when I heard you yell," she told them.

Harry apologized and was trying to save face when Hermione gave him a gentle push towards the door. Professor McGonagall smiled as she watched them scurry out of the room. She heard Hermione giggle and Harry laugh as they walked away from the room. Minerva's foot kicked something as she turned to leave the room. She picked up the ring box and studied it for a moment then she smirked.

They reminded her of James Potter and Lily Evans more everyday. She decided to tell Harry about his father's proposal later. It was probably the more interesting story told about the loo that Myrtle haunted.

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The next morning Hermione and Harry stopped by to see her parents. Emma hugged them both like she was Mrs. Weasley. Dan nodded his approval and asked about a date. They had made no decisions about that and Harry mentioned that whatever Hermione wanted was find with him.

Emma smacked Dan on the arm when he smirked and said that Harry was practicing to be a good husband already.

The dentists were eating their breakfast at the head table when they heard a shriek come from Susan. She was holding Hermione's left hand and staring at the ring. Hermione was surrounded by a group of giggling girls who wanted all the details. Harry looked like he wanted to escape.

Professor McGonagall glanced down the table at the muggle studies Professors. Emma raised her glass in a silent toast and Minerva smiled.

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Saturday June 6

Palm trees, white sand, and the soothing constant sound of the surf were cleansing. They sat outside at a table with a colorful umbrella at the blowfish bar watching as the sleek long boats with throaty engines passed back and forth along the edge of the deeper water. Fearless birds fluttered nearby hoping for a scrap of someone's sandwich. Parents with small children passed by. The children were anxious to get into the water or sculpt a fortress in the sand.

They realized how much they needed each other and promised that they'd do everything that they could to remain unhurt.

Harry seemed to cling to Hermione that night – ecstatic over the love that had found him and desperate not to lose it.

The next morning they walked along the beach for several miles each lost in their own thoughts then took the portkeys back to Boston then London before apparating back to the castle. It had been the shortest weekend of their lives. The events of the coming week would decide if they had another to share together or not.

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Saturday June 13

Harry opened his trunk and carefully picked up the small vile marked Slughorn/Riddle 1944. He unstopped the small crystal bottle and carefully poured the contents into his pensieve and got his camera. He poked his nose into the swirling mass and found himself in Slughorn's potions class with a seventh year Tom Riddle wearing Slytherin's ring. Harry took a photo. Next he found his memory from the chamber of secrets of Riddle writhing in pain a moment before disappearing after Harry had struck the diary with the basilisk fang. Again he took a photo.

Harry climbed out of the pensieve and put the two memories back into their respective bottles and placed them back into his trunk.

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Harry looked at the faces that were seated in the third floor corridor. He told them what he was going to tell them and asked if anyone wanted to leave. No one moved. After a few minutes he told them of the plan that would take place the next morning.

They were to arrive at the front lawn of the castle at 7:00 AM. He gave them the other details and turned them back to their group leaders for one last practice session.

Harry stood by Dan and Emma as he watched the forms spring from their wands. They were ready. He shook everyone's hand before they left and watched as they walked out the door. Dan, Emma, Hermione and Abraxan remained behind.

Abraxan said, "I want to thank you both for everything that you've done. Your plan is sound and you've done everything that you can possibly do to ensure people's safety." She looked at the pile of emergency portkeys that were ready to be passed out as well as the massive stack of gold shields.

Harry replied, "Thank you Minister. We just want this to be over with."

"I wish you both the best." She smiled at both of them.

"You too Minister," replied Hermione.

After Abraxan left Hermione looked at her mum and dad. They had been very quiet for the last few days. She drew them both into a hug and said, "I love you both."

Emma looked at Harry standing a few feet back and opened her arm to invite him in. After a minute she said, "We love you both and couldn't be prouder of you."

Dan said, "Harry, remember this is a carefully laid ambush, not a fixed battle between two armies. If it doesn't work the way you both planned it, promise that you'll both leave. This is the only thing that I'll ever ask you. Do what you can to keep her safe."

Hermione replied, "Daddy I promise." Harry nodded solemnly.

Emma hugged them both knowing that was a promise that was not within their power to make. She said, "Get some rest."

She and Dan made it almost to their rooms before the tears began hitting the stone floor.

... --- ...

Sunday June 14

At 4 AM Bill, Moody and Flitwick set up the anti-apparation wards within the large stone circle. They were methodical in their work and rechecked the charms several times before being satisfied three hours later. They were literally betting their lives and the lives of everyone that they cared about that the quality of their work was first rate.

"Moody, search the area again," said Bill. I don't want anyone sneaking up on us.

Moody nodded and replied, "OK. You take a page out of Potter's book," and carefully searched the skies. He muttered, "The ferret is supposed to be a decent flyer."

Ten minutes later, four groups of thirty witches and wizards portkeyed into the area and moved into their places as they were directed. Susan thought to herself, 'Tomorrow will come whether I'm here to witness it or not. I will do the best that I can.'

They positioned themselves as Harry had directed and waited to face the wizard who had been destroying families for more than fifty years. The Aurors spaced themselves around the circle. Director Thomas had given them specific orders. In the event that Potter fell or a group of Death Eaters arrived with Voldemort, they were to fire one shot at the attackers then immediately exit using the emergency portkeys.

... --- ...

Riddle saw the phoenix for a few seconds before it dropped the envelope on the table then disappeared in a flash of flame. It was marked To Tom from Harry.

Recalling the insulting message that he'd received when his house had been torched, Riddle was tempted to just flame the letter and be done with it. On the other hand, he hadn't received much mail lately. Curiosity got the best of him and he opened the letter-sized envelope. Inside were a half dozen 8 x 10 wizarding photos and a note from Potter.

Tom,

Happy birthday.

Here's hoping it's your last.

Harry Potter

Voldemort looked at the first picture and saw a photo of his mother as a young girl looking at Tom Riddle senior ride up on his horse. 'Where in the world did he get this?' thought Riddle. The second

photo showed Dumbledore talking with an eleven year old Tom Riddle at their first meeting in the orphanage. Riddle was dumfounded. The third photo Harry had gotten from Flitwick showing an eleven year old Riddle being sorted.

The fourth Harry had gotten from Tonks. It showed the Dark Mark still hovering over Privet drive. Riddle wondered who had taken it.

Tom picked up the fifth photo was from the Chamber of Secrets. It showed a sixteen-year-old Tom Riddle talking to a twelve-year-old Harry Potter. The words I am Lord Voldemort appeared as Tom waved a wand. Riddle was fascinated by the image.

Riddle picked up the sixth photo and felt the irresistible tug behind his navel. Seconds later he was slammed down within the huge stones of Avebury.

He was encircled by over a hundred witches and wizards in a very loose circle about a hundred yards across. Harry was also in the circle some fifty feet away.

Harry spoke. "Hello Tom. A bit ironic don't you think?"

Faster than Harry had expected, Riddle had his wand out and cast, "Avada Kedavra."

Harry barely got out of the way rolling to his left. Behind him Fred had his gold shield out and reflected the blast skyward as it hit with a solid clang. The shield shattered and Fred flew back. After he hit the ground a member of the medical team went to him and activated his portkey. Riddle sneered, "You will die in front of your little friends for your insolence, Harry Potter."

Harry had decided on the classic strategy of a young warrior facing an old pro – dodge him long enough to tire him out and go in for the kill. In this instance Harry believed that Riddle could only fire a handful or two of spells but realized that he was as fast as ever.

Harry sprung back to his feet careful to get back to about the same spot and replied, "Tom that wasn't very nice. Remember your own words. We must observe the niceties. First we bow."

Riddle didn't wait. Instantly he fired off another spell. "Avada Kedavra." The villagers couldn't believe their ears. How could anyone stand there and taunt such a dangerous wizard. Abraxan and a few of the Unspeakables carefully noted the intensity of the spells that Voldemort was casting.

This time Harry barely got away from the deadly blast which missed him by fractions of an inch. Clang!

Abraxan deflected the blast skyward. Her shield cracked and she went down. After a few moments she stood up again and transfigured a new shield.

Riddle tried disappearing and realized that he couldn't. Potter must have set up an anti apparation ward. For the first time in his life he felt real fear. 'At least I still have the hidden Horcrux.'

"Expecto Patronum," he heard someone say. 'Were the Dementors here?' he wondered as he saw an otter playfully amble forward past Harry. It then picked up speed and slammed into Riddle. For a moment he was on the ground howling in agony. Harry was amazed at the speed that he got up hoping that he hadn't made a horrible mistake.

Riddle was shaken. No one had ever cast the Cruciatus curse on him but he'd put hundreds of people onto the ground writhing in extreme agony. He hadn't felt such pain since his curse at baby Potter had rebounded. He fired again at Potter who easily sidestepped the curse.

Hagrid held his shield poorly. The jet of light hit the shield and hit one of the huge embedded stones chipping it. Harry glanced at it recalling how the statue had shattered after being hit in the department of mysteries.

"Expecto Patronum." A hundred Patronus forms emerged from the witches and wizards wands dashing their way toward Riddle. He was

unable to get out of the way and cast another Avada Kedavra curse as he was on the ground being hit with form after form. Riddle slithered in agony. He couldn't think. He couldn't breath.

Riddle's curse hit one of the shop owners who collapsed onto the ground dead before she fell. The Patronus forms faded and Riddle was left on the ground gasping for breath. He started to get up.

Hermione stepped forward and with all of the love in her heart cast her otter and had it slam directly into Riddle. The pain was excruciating, as if a thousand salt stained dull knives were flaying him all at once. He took aim and cast one last spell. Harry didn't even have to move out of the way as a pale jet of green light flew by him. He heard almost a hundred voices calling for their Patronus again. Only three fourths of them formed and they all attacked Riddle.

Harry unsheathed his sword. He ran as fast as he could to Riddle who was screaming as if being tortured with hot pokers. Harry swung the sword as hard as he could hitting Riddle just below the jaw line.

Unlike Nicolas de Mimsey Porpington, Tom Marvolo Riddle's head separated cleanly from his body hitting the ground with a thud and rolling a few feet before stopping. The screaming ceased and Tom's body spurted blood twenty feet for half dozen seconds before it collapsed into the ground.

Harry turned to find Hermione only to see the horrified look on Susan's face as she held the brilliant witch's body with Luna standing nearby.

Harry stumbled towards them his heart pounding in his throat.

The beautiful phoenix Brigid appeared in a flash of flame.

"Let her go Harry. She's..." Susan said as the frantic man desperately looked for a pulse.

"She is not! She promised me." Harry ripped off the priceless basilisk armor. He could see a faint lightning bolt cut just below her right breast. Brigid doused the area with a steady flow of pearly white tears.

Harry knew that there must be some measure of hope if Brigid was helping.

Alyx dropped to the other side of Hermione's limp body and began to examine her. She couldn't detect a heartbeat and Hermione wasn't breathing. She started CPR on her friend. "Harry, breathe for her." The normally soft-spoken witch quickly had assumed a command voice.

Harry tilted back Hermione's head took a breath and gently filled his love's lungs. Alyx began compressions on Hermione's chest pumping her heart for her. She wasn't in the medical group and didn't know she could use her wand. The first aid classes from her rough and tumble teenage years were flooding her mind.

A few seconds later Alyx said, "Again."

Harry complied.

Alyx counted and then said, "Again."

Harry did as he was told. The witches and wizards familiar with CPR watched praying it would help. The purebloods had no idea what they were doing.

"Again," Alyx said in almost a sob.

... --- ...

Hermione couldn't focus amongst all of the mist. A moment later, two auburn haired women who appeared to be in their early twenties approached her, each taking a hand. A blonde woman who bore a striking resemblance to Emma Granger accompanied them.

"Hello Hermione." The woman's brilliant green eyes locked onto Hermione's.

"Mrs. Potter?" she asked in surprise.

“Lily,” said the woman softly. Hermione shook her head trying to clear it.

“Ginny?”

“Hi, Hermione,” her friend said. “It’s good to talk with you again.”

Hermione looked at the blonde and felt her heart soar. She asked, “Grandma?”

“Hello my little darling.”

“Am I...?”

Lily replied, “No. It’s not your time. Your friend Luna cast an immobilizing charm and the wonderful armor you are wearing prevented a soul separation. Please go back to Harry and tell him that we love him and are so proud of you two. You make my son so very happy Hermione. Thank you very much.”

“Both of you make us all so proud. Harry’s just like my Andy,” Gloria Young told her only granddaughter.

“Take care of him. Goodbye Hermione,” Ginny told her.

“Goodbye. Go live your life. Vada è brillant,” Grandma said softly.

“We’ll talk again in a century or so,” Lily said with an easy smile.

Hermione wanted to call out as the three figures drifted away. She found herself unable to speak and felt herself falling through the mist.

... --- ...

Harry was beginning to seriously panic. Alyx flinched when she pressed too hard and felt one of Hermione’s ribs break. They had been at it for nearly three minutes when Hermione jerked in a spasm. She gave a cough.

It was the most beautiful sound that Harry had ever heard. Susan rocked back and fell on to her bum in shock. She watched the boy-who-lived activate the emergency portkey and they disappeared.

... --- ...

Emma was beginning to have a panic attack. Fred had portkeyed to the makeshift hospital that they had set up at Hogsmeade station. He would be fine. But there was no other word from the battle.

The silence of the medical group was putting her even more on edge. She was about to say something to Diane when there was a soft thump. She turned to see who had arrived and saw a scene from one of her nightmares.

Harry looked up and she saw the tears on his face. Emma found that her feet couldn't move. She stood there in shock.

"Oh God no," she heard Dan say and he rushed to her side. Madame Pomfrey beat him to Hermione. She waved her wand over the limp girl.

"What was she hit with?" Poppy demanded. Harry didn't respond. She grabbed him by the shoulder and repeated her question. Emma didn't hear his response but heard the gasp from those who had.

"Impossible. She's alive," Poppy snapped.

Emma felt someone slipping their arms around her and looked to see Susan standing next to her. Whatever was keeping her upright left her body and she sagged against the young witch. She heard the murmuring that Hermione had been hit by the killing curse but was still alive.

... --- ...

Abraxan could hardly believe her eyes. Thomas and a few others were taking photos of Voldemort's body parts and she had personally witnessed the young witch breathe after being hit squarely with a killing curse.

Within moments there were hundreds of spectators who grimly watched as Thomas began burning Voldemort's body. By the time the fire went out an hour later there were five thousand witches and wizards who had come to watch the spectacle and to celebrate.

She snapped Riddle's wand and placed the pieces in the fire.

... --- ...

An endless stream of people visited the hospital wing. Professors, students, Ministry officials and healers came to gawk, offer their congratulations or their best wishes.

Harry, Dan, Emma and Susan took turns waiting by Hermione's bedside. Diane visited often and ran interference from the students. Hermione was in a magical coma. They scared off most of the gawkers within hours. Harry posted Order guards outside the hospital wing after the Daily Prophet offered money for a picture of Hermione in the hospital bed.

Madame Pomfrey had few answers. The healers and specialists had taken to saying, "We need to wait and see."

... --- ...

Hermione awoke two days later. She had never been so tired in her life. She felt like the life had been sucked out of her. She opened her eyes slightly and tried to determine who was holding her hand.

In a weak voice she asked, "Mum?" She felt a squeeze of her hand.

"Right here, dear," Emma said softly.

"Harry?"

She was inquiring if he was still alive and felt immense relief when she heard his voice say, "I'm right here."

She was too tired to turn and look. She closed her eyes and gripped their hands before drifting back into a light sleep.

Madam Pomfrey and a bevy of healers rushed over to examine the second living case of a failed killing curse. They attempted to shoo the two well-wishers away. Harry frowned and replied, "Don't even think of it. We're not moving until we're ready." There was a flash of menace in his eyes that hinted of the force that he possessed.

Quelled, the visiting healers didn't repeat their request and quietly worked around them. It didn't make sense to anger the man who had just whacked off the head of the most dangerous man in the world. Harry and Emma resumed their spots content to let the others work around them.

Dan and Susan soon joined them and all four of them smiled when Hermione woke up and asked if she had missed her NEWTs.

... --- ...

Chapter 27

June 14

Moments after word began to leak out regarding Voldemort's demise, Lucius Malfoy raced back to the Dark Lord's hideout in Sheffield and stripped it of everything that might have some value. Through a series of robberies, their fortunes had improved in the last month leaving them with over a hundred thousand Galleons and nearly a million in pound sterling. Malfoy grabbed the spare wands, books and the invisibility cloak and was gone within the hour.

To cover his tracks he torched the home before he left for Bucharest and waited for Draco to join up with him. He left one of the payroll parchments with the names of the Death Eaters who had been killed in the fire lined out in a spot where it could be found. He lined out his own name like Riddle had for the others who had been killed and tossed the parchment fifty feet from the burning house and left just before it exploded.

The handful of newly recruited Death Eaters wisely departed for their homes in Romania and Sarajevo hoping to drift back into their previous lives.

As Malfoy had predicted, the magical signatures from the exploding potions immediately attracted Ministry officials. Arthur Weasley was among the first on the scene. He immediately called for a team of investigative Aurors. Within an hour it became obvious who had lived at the house. It seemed like every Ministry official was either at the site of the burning home or Hogwarts.

... --- ...

The vast majority of the Hogwarts students knew nothing about the planned ambush and were simply enjoying a leisurely Saturday morning. As Hermione was being examined at Hogsmeade station, Katlyn and Allie were listening to the wizarding wireless to hear the latest wizarding music. Minister Abraxan who came on to make a special announcement interrupting their plans.

“Good morning.

This morning at 8:07 the wizard who called himself Lord Voldemort was killed. I repeat Lord Voldemort was killed this morning at 8:07.

In an incredible display of courage a group of 124 volunteers led by Mr. Harry James Potter met Voldemort at Avebury. Mr. Potter dueled with Voldemort briefly while the others cast Patronus charms at Voldemort. The charms appeared to cause pain to the evil wizard, which aided Mr. Potter's efforts. Mr. Potter personally beheaded Voldemort.

Voldemort cast at least five killing curses at Mr. Potter during the battle. Shields deflected several but some hit the volunteers. The names of the volunteers who were killed in the battle have not yet been released.

I repeat. At 8:07 this morning, Mr. Harry James Potter killed Voldemort.”

The two girls were stunned at the news and looked around the Gryffindor common room. It was nearly empty. They ran down the corridor yelling as they went until they reached the Great Hall. Katlyn shouted, “Harry Potter killed Voldemort!”

Pandemonium erupted in the Great Hall. Everyone stood up and cheered and the noise level was incredible. The magic in the room channeled the absolute feelings of joy that the students felt. The ceiling, which had been grey and overcast, became a bright sunny day.

It took a few minutes before anyone noticed that most of the teachers and at least twenty of the students were missing.

Professor Vector stood up and said, “I ask that you sit at your tables quietly until they return. Miss Greystone, please come here for a moment.”

... --- ...

Odd Lovegood continued snapping photos and getting interviews of the different participants. Mr. Potter had invited him to come and document the event. He had brought his recordable omnioculars and had stood just behind the circle of volunteers. He couldn't produce a Patronus but felt he needed to be here for his daughter. He had been nervous for his Luna and her friend Neville and oh-so-proud of her when her quick thinking may have helped the Granger girl who had been hit by the last spell. After Mr. Potter had beheaded Voldemort, Lovegood had taken photos of the body and followed Director Thomas for a few minutes.

After they had finished igniting the body, he found his Luna and her Neville and gave them both a big hug. "Luna and Neville, I am so proud of both of you." He hugged them both again and said, "Luna it looked like your charm may have helped save Miss. Granger."

Luna replied, "Neville gave me the original idea. I was just in the right place to try it out. We have to go see how Hermione is doing." She gave him a kiss took Neville's hand and said, "Bye Daddy." They disapparated to Hogsmeade station, reported back in with professor McGonagall and walked back to the castle.

Within minutes the other students and the Order members had followed her. By the time that the Daily Prophet reporter arrived, all of the Order and DA members had left. Director Thomas, three Aurors and a Mediwitch were the only officials there that had actually been on hand at the battle. Thomas told them that they had already made their statements to the Quibbler and went back to his task at hand. He collected Riddle's ashes and banished them to the North Atlantic. The other Aurors had gone to investigate the burning home that Arthur Weasley's department had come across.

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Abraxan was not amused when she read the Daily Prophet the next day.

He-who-must-not-be-named killed by Harry Potter

Harry Potter somehow managed to kill the dark wizard yesterday in Avebury. Details of how he did it were unavailable yesterday as Ministry officials who were on the scene were unwilling to talk leading to speculation that Potter used dark magic or even an unforgivable curse in his quest to bring down the Dark Lord. One witness who refused to give her name indicated that five killing curses were cast during the battle.

Potter, seventeen, was not on the scene and has not answered owls requesting that he present his side of the story. Late last year Potter was investigated for causing extensive damage to one of the Herbology buildings at Hogwarts.

She stormed out of her office and walked over to Gringotts to see Bill Weasley.

... --- ...

Dinner that night was a loud affair. The DA members who had witnessed the event were shouting at a few of the Slytherins. They had read the Daily Prophet article suggesting that Potter had used an unforgivable to bring Riddle down and believed it. Anderson Condor was walking down his house table slapping his housemates in the back of the head.

McGonagall reached the end of her tolerance very quickly stood and in a very loud voice shouted, "Enough!"

Everyone sat down and instantly there was silence in the great hall. She looked at each of the students crossly and the silence was deafening. "The facts of the matter are this. Mr. Potter sent Voldemort a portkey to meet him in Avebury. A group of witches and wizards were able to weaken Voldemort by casting Patronus charms at him. Voldemort cast the killing curse at Mr. Potter five times. Mr. Potter managed to dodge the curses with remarkable agility. One of the curses hit an Auror who was killed as was one of the shopkeepers from Hogsmeade. Mr. Potter charged Voldemort in a demonstration of incredible courage and beheaded him with his sword. Mr. Potter cast no spells at Voldemort," she paused and then took a deep breath.

“Miss Granger was grievously injured and is in the hospital wing in very critical condition.”

No one said a word waiting for McGonagall to finish. After another moment of collecting herself, she did. “There will be no more talk of blood purity within these castle walls. Voldemort wasn’t a pureblood. Blood has nothing to do with ability or attitude, nothing. We need to focus on three things – A dark cloud has been lifted from our world, Miss Granger should be in all of your prayers and OWL and NEWT examinations will begin in a week and a half. Please finish your dinner.”

Back at the Gryffindor common room, Katlyn, Allie and everyone who had been helped by Hermione were subdued. No one except Harry or the Grangers had been allowed to visit. McGonagall’s words sounded like they were expecting Hermione’s death at any moment.

... --- ...

Odd Lovegood already had the content for this week’s Quibbler written and typeset. There had been snorkak sightings in Northern Norway and the world deserved to know. He had just a half page remaining so he wrote the following article.

Don’t miss next week’s issue.

Next week the Quibbler will present exclusive interviews and 24 exclusive, never before seen photos taken during the latest battle between Mr. Harry Potter and Tom Riddle, the dark wizard who called himself Lord Voldemort. Also featured will be eleven exclusive interviews from participants and the amazing story of the attempt to save the life of a courageous witch.

... --- ...

The following day Professor McGonagall found Anderson Condor and Katlyn Greystone in her classroom just after dinner. She was about to tear into them when she realized that Katlyn was crying on his shoulder. She approached them with a little less anger.

"What is going on here?" she asked. To her surprise Anderson gave her a look like she was a Death Eater.

"Nothing," he said. Katlyn's sobs quieted a bit and he patted her back. He was apparently much better with hysterical crying females than Harry had been at his age.

"It doesn't look like nothing. Miss Greystone what is the meaning of this?" McGonagall asked.

"I... I needed to cry and didn't want everyone to see me," she admitted.

"Why are you so upset?" McGonagall asked.

"You're kidding right?" Anderson said incredulously.

"I assure you Mr. Condor, I make no joke about it," McGonagall snapped.

"Well one of my friends is in the hospital wing and no one will tell me anything about her condition," Katlyn said. Her tears were gone and anger had taken their place.

"I didn't realize that you and Miss Granger were so close," McGonagall said frowning.

"Why wouldn't we be? She's the only one who cared when I had so much trouble adjusting to school here. She's the only one who helped us," Katlyn snapped.

"Us?" McGonagall asked. Katlyn didn't answer. She was trying not start crying again.

"The muggleborn students. Hermione did everything she could to help them adjust and cope. It wasn't all tutoring," Anderson answered.

"I had no idea," McGonagall murmured.

"Of course not. When I came to you first year for help you called it homesickness and sent me on my way," Katlyn said in an accusing tone.

"And I kept an eye on you afterwards. It didn't take you long to calm down and begin to thrive," McGonagall said.

"Yeah. If it hadn't been for Hermione that wouldn't have happened. She's not my best friend. We don't hang out or anything. But she's always there when I need someone to talk to," Katlyn said.

"I spent a couple days with the Granger's at Christmas. This has to be killing Dr. Emma and Dr. Dan," Anderson said. He looked like he was going to cry also.

McGonagall made a snap decision. She conjured some tissues for Katlyn and banished them when she was through.

"Follow me," she ordered.

The third years figured that they were on their way to the Head office to get into serious trouble. They were shocked when she led them to the hospital wing. Outside the door she stopped them.

"Wait here."

She vanished into the hospital's door and came back after a minute. She gave them both a very stern look.

"You will tell no one, and I mean absolutely no one, about this visit. One word out of line and you will both be serving detention with me every night next year. Am I making myself clear?" McGonagall said. They both understood and swore that they would tell no one. McGonagall let them into the hospital wing.

Professor Emma was laying up on one of the beds but she wasn't asleep. Dr. Diane was sitting on the bed next to her, as was Susan Bones. Professor Dan was holding Hermione's hand. His eyes never left her face. Harry was sitting on a chair next to the bed. His head was resting next to her hip and his eyes were closed.

Hermione seemed to be asleep.

Susan motioned them closer. She hugged each of them tightly and then had them sit down. Dr. Emma sat up and Susan took her hand. A few seconds later Emma pulled it away.

"Professor McGonagall said you two were especially worried," Susan told them.

"Hermione is my friend," Katlyn said. Susan nodded.

"I know. She thinks a lot of you too," Dr. Diane commented.

"No one would tell us anything. We just wanted to know when she would be okay," Anderson said.

"The healers won't even commit to her waking let alone when," Professor Dan answered not looking away from Hermione. Professor Emma flinched at his words.

They each received five minutes to talk to Hermione. Anderson told her about the essay she helped him write and how McGonagall had seemed impressed. Katlyn mentioned how she had gotten caught on the trick step again. Hermione never moved. When they finished McGonagall was herding them out of the room but Dr. Emma stopped her.

She led both of them to a corner of the room and talked quietly with them for a while. Susan watched her hug them both before they left. Emma and Dan traded places and kept their vigil.

... --- ...

Hermione awoke two days later. She had never been so tired in her life. She felt like the life had been sucked out of her. She opened her eyes slightly and tried to determine who was holding her hand.

In a weak voice she asked, "Mum?" She felt a squeeze of her hand.

“Right here, dear,” Emma said softly.

“Harry?”

She was inquiring if he was still alive and felt immense relief when she heard his voice say, “I’m right here.”

She was too tired to turn and look. She closed her eyes and gripped their hands before drifting back into a light sleep.

Madam Pomfrey and a bevy of healers rushed over to examine the second living case of a failed killing curse. They attempted to shoo the two well wishers away. Harry frowned and replied, “Don’t even think of it. We’re not moving until we’re ready.” There was a flash of menace in his eyes that hinted of the force that he possessed.

Quelled, the visiting healers didn’t repeat their request and quietly worked around them. It didn’t make sense to anger the man who had just whacked off the head of the most dangerous man in the world. Harry and Emma resumed their spots content to let the others work around them.

Dan and Susan soon joined them and all four of them smiled when Hermione woke up and asked if she had missed her NEWTs.

... --- ...

The mood in the Gryffindor common room was subdued. Professor McGonagall entered through the portrait hole followed by Susan Bones. Susan’s eyes were red and her face splotchy with tears.

Oh Merlin, no, Katlyn thought, her heart in her throat.

Professor McGonagall looked at the third year girl with her stern glare for a moment and then she smiled. She said, “Miss Greystone I am pleased to inform you Miss Granger awoke one hour ago. She is not receiving visitors but I’m sure her family will tell her that you asked after her.”

Katlyn stared at her for a moment and then tore out the portrait hole. She had to find Anderson.

... --- ...

June 20

Hermione was going out of her mind. She had been in the hospital wing six days. She had been awake four. Other than feeling a little weak she felt fine. No one seemed to believe her. If she heard the words precautionary measures one more time she was going to scream.

She was ready to hex someone and she wasn't going to be picky about her target either. That was probably the reason they had taken her wand. She was still having trouble believing that they had taken it from her. She had even more trouble believing that Harry had been the one to do it.

The healers were keeping an annoyingly close eye on her. Yes, healers. She had seven of them. Poppy had relented and let two specialists named Burns and Allen examine Hermione. Hermione had not given permission. Emma, in a deep moment of fear that Hermione would not wake up, had. The specialists had each brought in a team of people. They never left the hospital wing.

Each time she fell asleep they would run a wand over her. Each time she woke up they would do it again. Every time she went to the loo they wanted a sample. They noted her cravings and exactly how much she was eating. Hermione wasn't sure what they could tell from the meals she had eaten. She didn't care either.

After awaking and once again having a wand shoved in her face Hermione knew that it was time to put her foot down. She grabbed the wand and turned it on its owner.

"Don't point that at me," she snapped. Crookshanks, who had not left her side since making his way to the hospital wing, hissed at the man.

"Hermione," Poppy said gently.

Hermione scowled at the healer and threw back her covers. She gave the staff member whose name she didn't care to remember his wand back.

"Next time wait until I am awake," she snarled. She grabbed her dressing gown and headed for the loo. It was the only place she got the tiniest bit of privacy. After a short sit on the throne she was hustled back into bed by her Mum.

Emma was worried about Hermione and it was causing her to hover. She couldn't stop herself. She had been hearing about killing curses for days now. Hermione could forgive her Mum for it. It was the rest of the people that were making her mental.

Diane has enough to do, Hermione mused as she crawled back under the covers under Poppy's watchful eye.

Poppy asked, "Where is your sample?"

"Sample? I missed the cup. Sorry, maybe next time," Hermione answered. She pulled the covers up and turned onto her side facing away. Hermione heard the incantation that would check her vitals and closed her eyes.

"She needs to eat," Healer Burns said. Maybe that was what annoyed Hermione. They never used her name. They never spoke to her, just at her.

Harry joined her for lunch as did her parents. After her parents left to teach a class Harry sat down on the edge of the bed. The healers that were hovering moved in and began to work her over. They took yet another blood sample. Afterward they backed off and they began talking amongst themselves.

"Her blood pressure is up."

"She seems irritable."

"She isn't sleeping very well either. She was up four times last night," one said.

"She was up last night four times because you woke her up three times," Hermione snapped at the group.

"Hermione we are only concerned..." Poppy began but she stopped when Hermione turned her back and sank under the covers.

"What can I do, love?" Harry asked her softly.

"Make them leave, get me out of here for a couple hours, hold me," Hermione whimpered. I really am losing my mind, she thought. Who would have thought that not having a minute to yourself could drive you to insanity so fast?

Harry threw off his cloak and removed his shoes. She heard a privacy screen move so that they were blocked from the rest of the room. The bed creaked as he climbed under the blanket with her. She curled up against his chest and felt herself relax. Crookshanks mewed his approval and curled up at their feet.

It lasted ten minutes. Poppy's indignant "Mr. Potter!" was loud enough to wake the dead. To his credit Harry didn't move. Poppy insisted that they remove the privacy screen. Hermione almost smiled.

Hermione heard her parents come back and then leave. She heard Harry and Diane talking softly. She heard Susan and Lisa snicker when they came in. She never opened her eyes. Being in Harry's arms felt so good.

The healers asked Harry to move away from her and she tightened her grip on him. He refused to move for fear of waking her up. Poppy was insisting that they needed to examine her again.

"You're the ones worried about how she is sleeping. She's asleep now," Harry said knowing full well that his love was awake.

"Nevertheless. We need to run some more tests," Poppy told him.

Harry sighed and then kissed Hermione on the forehead. He apologized and then slipped out from her grasp. When she opened her eyes he kissed her for real and told her he would be back in a few minutes. Before she could speak he was out the door.

The healers gave her a full exam. Hermione did as they asked. She lifted her arms, closed her eyes, opened her mouth and took the deep even breaths required. When Healer Allen asked her to remove her shirt Hermione crossed her arms and refused. She was still refusing when Harry returned with her satchel. He brokered a compromise of Poppy examining Hermione's scar.

Poppy was frowning as Hermione eagerly took her bag from Harry. She said, "Mr. Potter you know that Miss Granger needs to rest."

"Madame Pomfrey you know Miss Granger's idea of resting is a three-foot potions essay. It's not going to kill her to have a book to read," Harry reasoned.

"I love you," Hermione said as she pulled out a copy of Hogwarts a History.

Poppy growled but relented. She walked away muttering about not listening to the healers. She would have been stunned if she knew what else was in the bag.

Harry put the privacy screen back in place and then threw up a silencing spell. He glanced around the screen and motioned for Hermione to stop. Poppy came back over and gave Harry a lecture. Harry sat down next to the bed innocently and picked up one of Hermione's books. Poppy didn't approve but she left it alone.

"We have about ten minutes before someone else comes over here," Harry pointed out.

Hermione pulled the muggle clothes out of the bag and tossed the invisibility cloak at Harry. She very quickly began getting dressed. Crookshanks shook his head and hopped off the bed as if he wanted nothing to do with this.

"Mum is going to have a fit," Hermione pointed out. Harry nodded.

"They'll probably ban you from the hospital wing," she said. He smiled.

"They can try," he said with a smirk.

"McGonagall will give you detention," Hermione said.

"Hermione, I have thought about all of the consequences. We're just going for a short walk. Down to the lake maybe. Even Poppy admits that you are only in the Hospital wing for precaution. It's not like I plan on taking you to Paris tonight," Harry told her. She grinned.

"I like Paris," she said wickedly. Remembering how the hotel room had hardly been left, he got his own wicked look.

Hermione wrote Emma a short note and they slipped under the cloak at just the right moment.

"What's with the screen?" Dan asked as he entered the hospital.

Years of practice allowed them to slip from behind the screen without tripping while wearing the cloak. Harry was behind her and had his arms around her stomach.

"Mr. Potter thought they needed some privacy," Poppy answered.

Dan peeked around the edge of the screen as Harry and Hermione slipped out the door.

"So where are they?" they heard Dan ask as they slipped away.

They wandered down to the lake and sat under the cloak. She sat between his legs and he pulled her to him. Hermione sighed in contentment as they watched the giant squid do back flips. Her crazy cat had followed them and Harry let him under the cloak. He hopped on his mistress' lap and promptly fell asleep.

"Harry?" she asked softly.

"What is it, love?" he asked.

"I... You remember that vision you had of Ginny? I had something like that after the curse hit me," she told him. He shivered not wanting to remember seeing her in Susan's arms. "I saw Ginny, my grandmother and your mum," she told him. She continued and explained the vision.

"I'm glad they sent you back," he said softly.

"I've been trying to think about it. Make some sense of it. It didn't really happen did it? I didn't really die did I?" She already knew the answer though.

"I think you did. Alyx and I must have performed CPR for almost five minutes. Your heart had stopped and you weren't breathing. I only knew that there was hope because Brigid refused to stop crying on your wound," he said in a low voice.

"I... Lily told me that the armor is what kept my soul from separating," Hermione said biting her lip.

Harry thought about that and then chuckled softly.

"Yeah, the skin from a dead monster that was supposed to purify the school saved the life of the biggest mudblood of all," she said.

"Don't call yourself that," he said no longer laughing. She sniggered.

"I told Mum I was going to get it tattooed on my bum," she said.

"I can think of much better things to get a tattoo of. How about 'I heart the boy-who-lived'?" he asked. She laughed softly.

"Well I do heart you," she said. She kissed him and then buried her face in his neck.

"I was so scared," he admitted. She pulled back and sighed.

“So was I. It was peaceful there. I was happy to see Ginny and Grammy. Your mum’s so nice,” she said. He smiled and then she continued, “But I didn’t want to be there. It felt wrong.”

“It was wrong. That’s why they told you to come back.”

“I know. I...” She stopped when she realized what she was about to say.

“What?” He prompted.

“I just had so many questions for them,” Hermione admitted, making Harry laugh.

They sat in silence enjoying the fresh air and each other for a little while. Hermione didn’t want to go back to the hospital wing. Harry didn’t want to let go of her.

Harry glanced over his shoulder as he heard a commotion at the edge of the hill that led to the lake. He saw Neville and Luna headed their way. They kept quiet as Luna and Neville approached.

“They’re not down here,” Neville said looking around.

“Sure they are. You just have to know how to look properly. I think we should just leave them be. Hermione needed to get away from those healers. They were adding hokie pon juice to her food,” Luna said.

“Hokie pon juice?” Neville asked.

“Oh yes. It’s supposed to help you sleep but has some strange side effects,” Luna said wisely. If Luna thought they were strange then the side effects must have been extreme.

“She would notice wouldn’t she? I mean you’ve seen her in the dining hall. Hermione always checks her food before eating,” Neville said.

“Harry took her wand so that the healers couldn’t,” Luna pointed out. She smiled in her special way and said, “Let’s go tell Emma that we found them by the lake and that they’ll be back in half an hour.”

“Err... We did?” Neville asked.

“Thanks Luna,” Hermione said causing Neville to almost jump out of his skin.

“You’re very welcome Hermione,” Luna said as they walked away.

“She scares me,” Harry said as they watched their friends walking away.

“Me too,” Hermione admitted.

They sat quietly for a while longer and then slowly made their way back to the hospital wing. As they approached the doors Harry snickered.

“Are you going to protect me from Poppy?” he asked.

“You have my wand, love. Are you going to save me from Mum?” she asked.

Harry slipped off the cloak and they entered the hospital. Chaos was the only word to describe the room.

Poppy was speaking to Minerva and she looked furious. “... in all my years have I have never seen such blatant disregard for ...”

The gaggle of healers were all squawking at each other. Hermione thought that they sounded like a flock of geese.

Emma was sitting in a chair by Hermione’s bed. She was rubbing her temples and looking at the floor. Dan and Diane were sitting on the bed and were the first ones to notice them. Dan looked angry but worse yet disappointed.

Luna and Neville were sitting on the floor next to the bed playing chess as if nothing were happening.

Hermione decided that Emma was probably the best place to start. As she walked by her Mum she placed her hand on Emma's shoulder. Emma looked up at her daughter but didn't speak. The look in her Mum's eyes told Hermione more than she wanted to know. Silence fell over the room.

"Where have you been?" Poppy demanded stalking towards them. Neville stood up and blocked the healer from coming closer. Poppy frowned at him. "Out of my way Longbottom."

"No," Neville said softly but firmly. The six healers had their wands out and pointed at Hermione ready to start an exam. Luna stood up next to Neville and crossed her arms.

"Mr. Longbottom, I need to examine Miss Granger," Poppy snapped.

"When you can explain how a very detailed description of Hermione's condition was published in this morning's Daily Prophet we might let you by," Luna told her. She knew that Poppy had nothing to do with it.

"What?" Harry demanded rounding on the group of healers. There was rage in his eyes and a billion galleons in Gringotts to back up his anger.

Dan and Diane got off the bed and Hermione sat down. She took her shoes off and glanced at the hospital gown. She tossed it on the back of a chair and sighed.

"Your mother's been worried," Dan told her in a tight voice. Hermione sighed.

"I'm sorry, Mum. I had to get out of here. The walls were closing in," Hermione explained.

"You couldn't have just said so?" Dan asked when Emma didn't respond.

"I can't even go to the loo with out four people waiting by the door. I needed to talk to Harry alone," Hermione said. She felt her stubbornness kicking in.

"You could have just asked for some privacy," Emma snapped.

"I have. Several times. No one seemed to respect my request," Hermione snapped back.

"So you decided that leaving was the better option?" Emma demanded.

Hermione didn't answer. Instead she crawled back under the covers with a sigh. Emma was about to really rip into Hermione when Diane stopped her.

Poppy managed to get past Neville and Luna and she began to examine Hermione. Harry, having finished his talk about patient confidentiality with the other healers returned to Hermione's side.

"Do I need to remind you Miss Granger that you were struck by the killing curse?" Poppy demanded as Luna wandered back over to the bedside. She sat down and seemed to be examining the chessboard.

"No ma'am," Hermione answered biting back the smart-ass reply.

"I think I do! Just what were you thinking leaving the hospital like you had only broken your leg?" Poppy asked.

Harry'd had enough and icily replied, "The last person to survive a killing curse wasn't placed in a fish bowl for endless examination and prodding. He was dumped off on a doorstep." No one said a word, largely out of fear for his obvious anger.

"I..." Hermione stopped and closed her eyes. She decided that it didn't matter what she said so she said nothing. Harry rubbed the back of her neck gently. Poppy continued to mutter about idiocy and lack of respect as she examined Hermione. When she finished she summoned Hermione's dinner tray. Hermione stared at it.

Luna pulled her wand from behind her ear and handed it to Hermione without looking up. Hermione took it and ran a detection spell on the tray. It glowed bright red.

Harry swore loudly and stood up. Hermione grabbed his hand.

“So what have they been putting in my food?” Hermione asked pushing the tray away.

Poppy looked astounded and used her own wand on the tray. The last time Harry had that look on his face, people died shortly after. The healers lost the know-it-all looks that had been on their faces moments earlier. They had collectively angered the man who had killed the most dangerous man on the planet.

“So Luna, what are the side effects of hokie pon juice?” Hermione asked, still holding his hand.

“Hmmm... Oh that. Claustrophobia, listlessness, inability to think clearly and warts on your left forearm. Of course if you take enough it also causes extreme sexual arousal,” Luna said as she moved a chess piece.

“Well thank Merlin for small favors,” Hermione muttered. She didn’t want to think about being locked in the hospital wing with that problem. Harry, who was holding her left hand, turned over her arm. There were small bumps on it.

“If you use just enough you become very suggestible. Maybe you just have too much of a mind of your own for someone,” Luna said with a shrug.

The adults were watching the exchange. Poppy called for a house elf and asked about Hermione’s food trays. The elf immediately pointed out which of the healers had asked him to put the potion in Hermione’s food. Hermione was glad she wasn’t that person as Poppy advanced on them.

It wasn’t the Master Healer that the man needed to worry about. Harry stormed towards the group with a raging intensity that silenced the renewed squawking in an instant. His loud demand to know what the man was thinking was cut off when Luna flipped her wand and

caused a bubble of silence around the group. Amazingly enough he never pulled his wand, though one of the healers soiled himself.

Hermione glanced at her parents. She could tell Dan and Emma were really angry. Diane didn't look happy either. Hermione sank into bed ready to be yelled at. Luna stood suddenly and grabbed Dan and Diane by the hands. She pulled them towards the door.

"I have some questions about muggles that just can't wait," Luna said. She called for Neville and he helped shepherd them out of the room.

Emma sat down on the edge of the bed and took Hermione's hand.

"You scared me half to death. I saw the empty bed and thought..." Emma said. She was about to start crying. Hermione hugged her. She would rather be yelled at than to have made her mum cry.

"I'm sorry I scared you Mum. I really am," Hermione told her. Emma didn't respond and held her tighter.

Poppy, Harry and Minerva approached them. Poppy was snapping at Harry. She didn't feel he had the right to order anyone out of the hospital wing. Harry didn't care what she felt. He would do anything to protect Hermione.

Hermione didn't let go of her Mum. Harry sat down on the bed behind Hermione.

"You do not have to worry about any more potions in your food. They won't be doing it again. However, I do agree that you are not sleeping well," Poppy told her as the elf brought another tray.

"It's difficult to sleep when someone is poking at me with a wand every hour. Can't they just leave me alone?" Hermione asked pulling back from Emma.

"You bet they can. I want them to leave," Emma said.

"I'm sorry but I need their help. I have no idea how to treat Hermione's injury," Poppy said.

"And neither do they. You're not treating my injury anyway. I'm not injured. It's just the same tests over and over. Bloody precautionary measures. Look, I trust you. If you wanted me to take a potion you would shove it down my throat if you had to. You wouldn't lace my food with it. I don't know those people and they are driving me mad treating me like a lab rat," Hermione said.

"Lab rat?" Minerva asked. But Poppy seemed to understand.

"I honestly don't know what to expect next Hermione. I want to be prepared for anything. Healer Burns and Healer Allen have been studying the effects of the killing curse for years. You are an exception to the rule. We don't know why you didn't die," Poppy explained.

"I did. The basilisk armor kept my soul from separating. Luna cast an immobilization charm on me. Harry and Alyx brought me back. But I was dead," Hermione said.

"How... how do you know?" Emma asked.

Hermione looked her mother in the eye and said, "I just know." She didn't want to explain her vision in front of everyone.

"That's not good enough Hermione. Susan told me that you weren't breathing and your heart had stopped. Am I to believe that Alyx and Harry started your heart and lungs without a wand?" Poppy asked.

"It happens every day in the muggle world," Harry commented. Hermione sighed.

"You don't know what to expect next? You're one of the best healers in the world. I know because I checked your qualifications during first year. I'm not worried about being in your care. You've saved my life more than once. I'm worried what one of the experts is going to do next. I just want them to leave me alone. I'm not a guinea pig," Hermione said firmly.

"It is your right to refuse their care. I should tell you that they are only looking for a way to stop the curse," Poppy informed her. Hermione shrank again but Harry scowled.

"Don't you think Hermione has done enough? After everything that has happened in the last seven years, isn't that enough? Maybe they should practice on each other." Harry muttered.

"You know I might not react so badly if they didn't have the people skills of a ruddy blast ended skrewt. Not one of them has spoken to me in four days. I've watched them treat my parents as if they were as thick as Crabbe and Goyle. I understand what they are researching. Blimey, I understand why they want to examine me. What I don't understand is being treated as if I am a half-witted niffler. Quite frankly Madame Pomfrey, I'm done putting up with it. I am more than happy to help their research but I will not be treated like the village idiot any longer," Hermione told her.

"Hermione mind your language. Poppy, please ask them to leave for the rest of today. We can discuss things when we are all a little more rational and when my daughter is not under the influence of a potion," Emma said in a tight voice.

Hermione knew she was still going to get a lecture but she felt better about it. Harry pulled her close and she sighed. Together they could face anything.

... --- ...

Later that night Harry and Dan had a conversation while searching for a book that Hermione wanted. Harry was pretty sure that it was on her desk but was afraid to touch her organized chaos.

"Harry, I'm extremely disappointed in both of you. It was stupid to risk Hermione's health like that. What were you thinking?" Dan asked.

"The risk was minimal. Hermione needed to get out of there, if only for a couple hours," Harry told him. Dan frowned.

"So you're a healer now?" Dan asked. Harry found the book and tossed it across to one of the love seats.

"No, I'm not. But I do know that Hermione needed something else. No one seemed to care how she feels about her treatment. Well, I care. If she's unhappy then I'm going to do something about it," Harry said firmly.

"Being in the hospital is not supposed to be fun and games. She almost died. I can't believe you took that risk," Dan argued.

"She didn't almost die. She did die. I'm not Dr. Turnbull, but being constantly monitored and checked on every time she breathes is making her mental."

"You don't understand, Harry. She... I thought she was dead. I thought that I was going to have to bury another one of my babies," Dan told him collapsing to the loveseat. Harry sat down next to him.

"And I thought I was going to have to bury the woman I love. I do understand, Dan. I know that you and Emma were going spare waiting for the final battle. Waiting to see which one of us would die. I was waiting too you know. It was my decision as who to put in danger. I didn't want her there. I wanted her to be checking on my bloody relatives in the States, but she needed to be there. I don't know exactly why his spell failed. I don't know a lot of things, Dan. I do know that I love her. I would have stepped in front of that curse without a second thought," Harry said. Dan was shaking his head trying not to cry.

"I know you would have, but why risk letting her leave the hospital wing?" Dan asked.

"What's wrong with her except exhaustion? Nothing. I gave her wand back to her and she can do magic fine. She is able to walk, talk, breathe and speak clearly. Even Madame Pomfrey admits that she's keeping her there only for precaution. I believe in better safe than sorry too but Hermione needed to talk with me. She needed to get away from those healers who were treating her like she was nothing more than an experiment. Isn't it better that I helped her and was with

her than her leaving in the middle of the night just to get some fresh air?" Harry asked. Dan was astounded.

"She was going to..." Dan started to ask and Harry shrugged.

"I'll tell you this; if those healers don't start treating her better she'll tell them all to go hang. If she doesn't curse them first. You need to get Emma to back off. Hermione is suffocating," Harry said.

"It's not that easy you know. She's my little girl. I don't care if she's engaged to be married to you. I still see a seven year old who asked questions that would make your head spin," Dan said. Harry felt himself begin to smile.

"Well she never outgrew that," he commented. They both smiled for a few seconds.

"All right," Dan said standing up. He picked up his daughter's book and added it to the one he had gotten for his wife. Then he started for the door. Harry followed him. Dan sighed and said, "How are you going to help me convince Emma to give Hermione some space?"

"I have to help?" Harry asked. Dan gripped his shoulder and led him down the hall.

"Oh yes. You know what it's like to convince Hermione to do something she doesn't want to do. She learned it from her Mum," Dan said. Harry thought about it and then nodded.

They entered the hospital wing and found Hermione, Emma, Susan and Diane. Harry sat down on the edge of the bed and took Hermione's hand. Remembering something she had told him he smiled.

"I was going to ask Lavender to do a star chart and a reading for the eighth of August. What do you think? Want to get married on eight eight nine eight?" Harry asked. Hermione gripped his hand.

"Really?" she asked.

"I'd do it tonight but something tells me you want a bigger wedding than the six of us," Harry said.

"August eighth! That's not nearly enough time," Emma said blinking out of her stupor.

"Time for what?" Harry asked innocently. Hermione hid her smile carefully.

"Flowers, booking a church, a reception hall, getting a dress and a caterer," Emma answered.

"Do we need all that?" Harry asked as if confused, conjuring a rose for her. Dan swallowed his laughter as he realized what Harry was doing.

"Err... I don't know. What kind of wedding are you having?" Emma asked, smelling the yellow rose. Hermione smiled.

"A nice simple nonmagical ceremony. I want the rest of your friends to be able to come and some of the kids from church that weren't so awful to me when we were growing up," Hermione said. Emma frowned.

"We need something to write on. Get the guest list started... Who is standing up for you?" Emma asked.

"I haven't asked her yet. Susan? Want to take part in a muggle wedding?" Hermione asked.

"Is it true that the muggle bridesmaids dresses are traditionally ugly?" Susan asked.

Emma and Diane both laughed a little.

"Sometimes. We'll find something you like since you are the only one I plan on asking," Hermione told her. Susan smiled.

"I'll be there."

Emma stood up and pulled Diane to her feet. She kissed Hermione and then Susan. She gave Harry a quick kiss on the forehead and a stern look.

“Don’t think I don’t know what you just did Mr. Potter,” she said. He tried to look sheepish and failed. She kissed him again, “Thank you.”

... --- ...

On McGonagall’s request, the examinations board began the OWL and NEWT examinations a week later than originally scheduled. Griselda Marchbanks acknowledged that defeating the darkest wizard of their lifetime was sufficient reason to adjust the schedule a bit. As the NEWT examinations had to be awarded as quickly as possible after actually sitting for them, Marchbanks announced that the examinations would be almost entirely practical rather than theory.

Hermione, who had gained back her strength and felt as good as new, was initially disappointed at the announcement, then realized that with seven years of extra credit research, in the ninety minutes that students would be given to demonstrate their ability in a subject she would excel. Prior to the exam they were given fifteen minutes to review the competency sheet. Typically a student who had mastered the NEWT level would need sixty to eighty minutes to demonstrate the NEWT level tasks and could attain extra points in the remaining time.

Thus on the day of the charms examination Hermione was able to demonstrate the Horcrux destroying charm that she had helped develop to an absolutely astounded pair of examiners. She was able to demonstrate steering her Patronus otter and have it slam into a very amused Harry Potter repaying him for its effect. When it was his turn for extra points in charms Harry demonstrated how he had turned a photograph into a portkey.

In potions they were given potions to either start or had to perform the next step on one that was mid-way through brewing. Harry was amused when he told an astonished pair of examiners that he’d had personal experience with each of the nine restorative potions that

they had him work with. For extra credit, he started Polyjuice potion from memory.

Susan listened as Neville related his success in Herbology and its connection with potions. Once he had made the connection between the two, Slughorn's class had become one of the easiest for him. The boy who had been intimidated into melting cauldron bottoms was gone, replaced by a young man, confident in his skills and ready to take on the world.

Knowing that he would never mention half of the things himself, Minister Abraxan had sent in the omniocular videos of Harry defeating dementors, inferi, Death Eaters and Voldemort as well as a sample of the basilisk skin left over from making the vests earning him the highest defense NEWT grade ever recorded.

To no one's surprise, Hermione sat through every NEWT examination that was offered. Likewise, Harry wasn't surprised when she went into a recap of every demonstration point discussing the merits of using that particular charm or spell in an assessment. Afterwards many of the fifth and seventh year students personally came up to Harry or Hermione and thanked them for the help that they had offered in various subjects.

To no one's disappointment, the examination week finally ended.

... --- ...

July 2

Harry hadn't played Quidditch since the pick-up game with Ron eleven months ago. Moody had talked him into resigning from the house team and had kept him busy during most of the interhouse games during the year. He smiled as he reflected on the words that the old Master Auror had spoken. "I'm not asking you to be my friend, Potter. I'm not asking that you like me. My job is to keep you alive so that you can dislike me for the next hundred years."

Thus Harry was slightly surprised when McGonagall announced the student faculty quidditch match at breakfast the day before the

leaving feast. "Potter, Turpin, Bones, Padma, Tracy, Dean, and Mr. Longbottom. You have one hour to suit up."

As the surprised students went down to get their brooms. McGonagall and those who had taught the classes went and got their equipment.

They were somewhat shocked when they reached the locker rooms. There was a set of forget-me-not blue quidditch robes for each of them. On the back was a gold shield like the one that they had used against Riddle. On one side of the shield was a silver sword; on the other was their Patronus form.

Lisa quipped, "Be glad that we didn't end up using the pan scouring charm on him. Otherwise we'd look like we were wearing a place setting."

"I wonder who we'll be playing against?"

"What do you mean?" asked Harry

"There were about a dozen instructors this year for defense. We know the Grangers don't fly. Mrs. Figg doesn't. Slughorn's too big to get on a broom. Flitwick doesn't fly much anymore."

"We'll find out. Lisa you play keeper right? Why don't you be captain?"

"Susan, Tracy and Padma are very good chasers. Dean and Neville, can you play beater?" Dean played on a regular basis. Neville flew about as much as Hermione. They nodded. Lisa smiled and asked, "Harry, you don't need any advice about being seeker after all this time, do you?" They all laughed.

Harry replied, "I'll do my best."

They went out and flew a few warm-up laps. Arabella was given the opportunity to do the announcing again. "For the facility, Aurors Gunner Fawcett and Keith Bradley will play as beaters and Professor Sprout as keeper." There was quite a bit of cheering. They were all rather popular. "Professors McGonagall, Vector and Auror Alyx will

play as chasers.” There seemed to be more cheering this time, particularly among the older boys. Figg continued saying, “And finally as seeker, the one, the only Madam Hooch.” There was a lot of cheering. Her flying ability was legendary.

They went around the field twice with their warm-up laps. Figg continued. “Officiating today’s match up is knight bus driver Ernie Prang.” There was a standing ovation and a fair amount of ribbing regarding the highly nearsighted bus driver.

Prang released the snitch counted ten seconds then released the bludgers. Mounting his broom, he rose a hundred feet in the air and dropped the quaffle for a fair catch. Harry flew upward and watched for a moment. Hooch flew up to him and said, “Good luck today Mr. Potter.”

Harry noticed that she was on a very fast broom, nodded and said, “You too Madam Hooch. It’s fun to be flying with you.” A moment later he took off. Hooch easily kept pace with him matching him in both speed and agility. Suddenly Harry went into a nearly vertical dive. Faster and faster he dove with Hooch following him. A few feet from the ground they both pulled up smiling at each other. In truth she was far and away the best flyer that Harry had played against.

Meanwhile the students were doing well against the facility. The student chasers played well together and Professor Sprout was hopeless as a keeper. The beaters seemed content to bat the bludgers back and forth to each other for a bit of warm-up. Susan scored another goal.

It was a fun game to watch. The people in the stands cheered for every good play regardless of who made it. In time it was 200 to 40 in favor of the students. Suddenly Hooch went into a dive while Harry was on the other side of the stadium. Alyx scored against Lisa just as Hooch caught the snitch.

The game ended in a tie, everyone had fun and no one had gotten hurt. The fans had the opportunity to see some outstanding flying; so all in all, it had been an excellent morning. After they landed, both teams lined up and shook hands. Somebody notified Ernie that the

snitch had been caught and he got down from his broom. As they were shaking hands Minister Abraxan and the Wizengamot officials were preparing to enter the field for the Order of Merlin awards.

Harry and the others quickly showered and put on their school robes and walked out to sit down again. The stands had been magically enlarged to hold more than twice as many people as normal. Most of the villagers and dozens of Ministry officials were in attendance.

Abraxan used the Sonorus charm and called for a moment of silence. The light side had prevailed, but the cost to the people of Hogsmeade had been terrible. She began, "Good morning." The people in the stands replied back.

"We are gathered today to honor those whose outstanding contributions have made standing free in the sunlight without fear a privilege that we can again enjoy. We should never take this privilege for granted, for it was paid for with the blood of so many. The citizens of Hogsmeade can live again in freedom, as can all of the citizens of Britain. The men and women that are being honored today have made that possible." First she called the Aurors who had helped at Avebury. They were awarded Order of Merlin third class awards. She called on the villagers who had helped at Avebury. They were awarded third class awards. There was extra cheering as Lenny, Kris and Mary Folgard stepped up to collect their awards.

Second class awards were given to most of the DA and to the Order. Abraxan talked of how they had persistently volunteered their time again and again to face down evil. There was extra cheering when Arabella Figg, Poppy, Dan, and Emma were called. As the only living First Class recipient, Harry had the honor of placing the medals around everyone's neck. Hagrid had to kneel and have his ribbon substantially lengthened, but he was the proudest man alive when he received his award. Years of prejudice and sniggering about his marginal ability as a wizard vanished from his mind forever in that one moment.

"Thanks Harry," said Hagrid. "I owe it all to you."

"No worries Hagrid. Congratulations."

Finally it was time for the first class awards. Hermione, Moody and Remus were called. Abraxan spoke of outstanding wizardry in terms of giving everything that you possessed to the cause then searching for more. Harry was so proud of each of them. The applause was thunderous.

A minute later Abraxan continued. "Finally we come to Mr. Harry James Potter. The wizarding world simply cannot adequately express its gratitude to you so I asked for some assistance."

The Prime Minister walked up and was handed the magical microphone. He was brief, "On behalf of the 3641 lives that Tom Riddle and his followers took in the last fifty-four years, Britain offers her heartfelt thank you. Her Majesty has asked that you and twenty guests of your choosing accompany you on Monday evening for a Royal Knighting ceremony at Buckingham Palace." He handed Harry the official proclamation.

Harry was awash in a sea of sound.

Reporters from wizarding papers from all over the world were there, snapping photos and shouting questions at Harry who was doing his best to remain calm. Odd and Luna Lovegood stood off to the side, knowing that they would be the only ones that he would actually talk with.

Diane was so proud of Harry, but knew that at that moment he would rather be battling monsters than be the focus of so much attention. She thought of the vision that Hermione had related and knew that at that moment, the attention of millions was focused on her Goddaughter's lover.

After an hour that seemed like an eternity, Hermione found Harry and they took a portkey back to the castle.

... --- ...

After dinner that night the NEWT certifications were announced. The Board of School Governors headed up the awards ceremony.

Hermione and Lisa were awarded NEWT certifications in all eight categories. Hermione's composite score was amazing. The board still hadn't found a recorded case of a higher score.

The recipients of the various categories were called up. Lisa scored highest in Charms, Neville received the highest score in herbology, while to no one's surprise Harry scored highest in defense. Hermione scored first in the others and second in charms. Susan scored second in defense, tied for second in Herbology and third or fourth in most of the other subjects thanks largely to help from her adopted sister.

Certifications were given in charms, potions, and defense, care of magical creatures, transfiguration, herbology, and arithmancy and muggle studies.

The professors in each of the topics were on hand. Collectively they were amazed that several certifications had been given to students who hadn't even attended their seventh year class.

Finally it was time to go back to their rooms and pack up their belongings. Dobby and Winky helped transport their belongings back to Grimmauld Place. Molly and Arthur had returned to the rebuilt Burrow a few days before.

... --- ...

Minerva McGonagall looked out over the sea of faces at the leaving feast. She carefully looked over her seventh year Gryffindor students. She'd never had a class that had made her feel so proud. It wasn't just Harry and Hermione. Each of them had in their own way made a difference.

She nodded to the charms Professor and he tapped his glass. The room went silent as she stood.

"Good evening. Another year has passed here at Hogwarts. I must say it has been quite a year indeed. After the murder of Professor Dumbledore last year I had hoped that the war would stay away from our door. That wasn't to be. I must ask that you raise your goblet in

honor of those who gave their lives to defend the light from evil. They all knew that the risk was there and stepped forward anyway, because someone needed to,” Minerva began.

After a moment of silence she continued, “This year has been like no other before and no other in the future.”

I want to thank Dr. Dan and Dr. Emma for taking over the muggle studies program. They have enlightened both myself as well as the board of governors many times over. I would also like to thank Dr. Diane for the insight that she offered. All three of you have immensely helped both the children and the wizarding world with your efforts this year.”

The applause was quite loud. Hermione smiled at her parents and Diane who were embarrassed.

“I dare say I would be remiss in my duties if I didn’t mention that this years seventh year class was awarded more NEWT certificates per student than any class in the past twenty years. I’m extremely proud of each of you. This is the first year in twenty years that every seventh year student received NEWT certification in potions. I am especially astonished since several of you did not take the class. Perhaps Professor Slughorn could explain that for us,” Professor McGonagall told them.

“I was quite delighted myself Head Mistress. I dare say they had an amazing independent study program going. I suspected that Miss Granger tutored them all but she denies it,” Slughorn said.

Harry looked over at Hermione who looked as puzzled as he was. She shrugged and he grinned. Hermione looked over at Lisa who winked at her.

“Indeed we will have to get to the bottom of that later. I must tell you that the past seven years have been the most interesting in my teaching career. It’s always the students that make this job what it is. I would like to tell you about this year’s seventh year class. Shall I start with oh, how about Hannah Abbott?”

All the seventh year students laughed. Hannah had always been first in line and could raise her hand before roll call even began. She always did too.

“Hannah Abbott, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Ron Weasley, Parvetti Patel. Those are names and friends that we will always remember. There are some other students who are missing from this class that I didn’t name. I leave them out on purpose because it was their choice to follow the dark lord. That brings me to my point. It is our choices that make us who and what we are.”

“Before I award the Quidditch Cup and the House Cup I have asked the Head Boy and Girl to say a few words. Mr. Potter?” McGonagall said offering him the floor. Harry stood up.

“Well Professor McGonagall said what I was going to about making choices so now I am stuck without words for you,” Harry said getting a laugh out of his classmates.

“Seriously, Professor Dumbledore told me the same thing about choices in my second year and I have to agree. I have seen how little choices have made the difference in life and death. Seven years ago I chose to be friends with Ron Weasley instead of Draco Malfoy. That decision made a huge difference in my life. I hope that everyone here will think about his or her choices. You can choose to live in the light or you can choose to drown your soul in the dark arts.”

Harry thought for a moment and continued, “I will say this. It is my intent to help make the British wizarding world a better place by helping good people help themselves. If your dream is to start a business venture like Fred and George Weasley have, please contact me via Mr. Bill Weasley at Gringotts. I’ll help you follow your dream.”

Harry sat down to the applause of his classmates. Hermione stood up and gave them all a smile.

“I was told to keep this short,” she said. Seamus laughed and then covered it with a cough. She gave him her best Professor McGonagall look and then grinned at him.

“Oh go on and laugh Seamus. You know you want to. All right then. I only have one thing to say. Vada è brillant,” Hermione told them. She heard the gasp come from the head table and turned to meet her mother’s gaze. The murmurs around the room made Hermione roll her eyes. She said, “Oh honestly. Go to the library and look it up.”

Harry chuckled as she sat down.

“Honestly...” he said in imitation of her. She smirked.

Minerva stood again and said, “That is all very sound advice. Now I believe we have a couple of cups to award. First the Quidditch cup. I quite enjoyed its stay in my office. As you are all quite aware, the cup was won for the first time in three hundred years by the Hufflepuff team,” McGonagall said offering the trophy to Sprout. The Hufflepuff table exploded in cheers.

“Quite well done indeed. The house cup race was astonishingly close this year. There are some last moment points to award tonight. Barring a fistfight in the library Ravenclaw or Slytherin might have stood a chance. Dr. Diane assures me that all of you involved have made a valiant effort in your anger management issues so I will award each of you five points. Miss Granger’s astonishing NEWT results have gained her fifty points for Gryffindor. Before anyone can accuse me of favoritism, I didn’t award these points. Professor Slughorn and Professor Vector did. Miss Turpin will receive ten points for the outstanding score that she received on her charms NEWT. Miss Bones is awarded eight points for the amazing job she has done in muggle studies. If I am not mistaken that brings the totals to four hundred twenty points for each house. I believe we shall call it a tie. Hogwarts wins the house cup,” McGonagall declared.

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As the students were having the final breakfast of the term at school, the Daily Prophet brought yet another controversy onto the school.

Hogwarts grading scandal uncovered

In yet another case of mismanagement at Hogwarts, former Professor Severus Snape was found to be systematically lowering grades of students outside of Slytherin house. In a typical example convicted Death Eater Snape systematically lowered grades of students such as Neville Longbottom. Longbottom son of famed Aurors Alice and Frank Longbottom was regularly given barely passing grades and harassed by Snape who verbally abused students such as Harry Potter. Alice Longbottom was a certified potions Master who worked for the Ministry for three years before being tortured into insanity by convicted Death Eater Bellatrix Lestrange.

Neville obviously had his mother's talent for potions as he recently achieved NEWT certification in potions. Hogwarts Headmaster McGonagall offered no comment regarding to Snape's systematic abuse of students.

... --- ...

Draco slammed down the newspaper in disgust. "Potty this, mudblood that. They can stick their NEWT awards up their mother's..." An idea came to him. He had better skills than Potty and had been personally tutored by the most brilliant wizard of the age. He could take Potty out in less time than it took Potty and a hundred others to defeat the Dark Lord. He knew just what he needed to do.

... --- ...

While Draco was worrying over the coverage that the Daily Prophet was giving, Director John Thomas was carefully noting the recent string of daytime bank burglaries. It seemed very odd to him that their cameras never picked up any photos. Stranger still, most of the money taken had come from the vaults rather than the teller drawers indicating that the perpetrators believed that they had plenty of time. Based on the reports that he had read, nearly ten million pounds had been taken so far.

He decided to make mention of it in his final briefing that he needed to schedule with Minister Abraxan before he went back home to Australia and his regular job. He reflected on the old Asian saying,

“May you live in interesting times.” The last year had certainly been interesting.

... --- ...

Harry helped Hermione and Emma up the steps of the train as Dan looked on. Dan had never been on a steam train and had fun looking at the Edwardian age machinery. Like much of the curriculum in the course that he and Emma had taught, it was from an age that had passed.

Harry sat down with the others and nodded off for a moment. A welcome recollection came to him.

“Is anyone sitting here? Everywhere else is full.” He smiled, hoping that his best buddy was happy and healthy. Harry wondered where all of the orphans were spending their holiday. He made a note to himself to ask about them at the next Order meeting.

Luna walked in and asked, “Was it everything that you thought it would be?”

Harry looked up, lost in his thoughts. Luna asked, “Was Hogwarts everything that you thought it would be?”

Harry replied, “I didn’t know anything about it until Hagrid found me a month before school started, but I’d have to say, yes and a whole lot more. I miss the Professor...I miss everyone who was taken from us.”

Emma asked, “What could have been better?”

Harry replied, “Hermione is right. We were talking earlier. The firstborn children, the children who didn’t grow up in a magical household are at a pretty serious disadvantage in a few of the subjects, herbology and potions. They also have to stumble onto information about the culture of the magical world. I think half of the whole pureblood is better crap comes from that lack of a proper introduction into the magical world.”

Hermione nodded and said, "There were things that Luna learned when she was seven or eight that I didn't find out about until third year. I agree about the prejudice part."

Luna replied, "That works both ways. Neville and I know very little about the nonmagical world." Emma was pleased. Muggle sounded so derogatory.

Emma asked, "What would have made it easier?"

Neville wanted to reply, "Having a mum and dad," but he wasn't looking for sympathy. Instead he said, "My Gran wasn't interested in sending me to any nonmagical activities like football. That would have been better, but she did the best that she could."

Hermione replied, "Professor McGonagall told me that Katlyn felt better having someone to talk with. I was happy to help."

Luna agreed and added, "A lot of the purebloods who are home schooled aren't very well prepared for boarding school either. The nonmagical kids seem to have better study habits."

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During the ride back to London dozens of students came up to Hermione and Harry, thanking them for helping with one thing or another. Emma noticed that it wasn't just the Gryffindors. They had touched the lives of most of the students in one way or another. She was especially glad to see a handful of the younger Slytherins come up and offer their thanks.

Harry was glad that Hermione had picked up the habit of taking photographs. They were wonderful memories. His favorites were the DA pictures and those of the students flying at the different pick-up quidditch games. He would get copies made and send them to all of the various people.

"I suppose we should walk up and down the train once just to see if everything's OK," said Hermione, still the head girl.

Harry flashed a dark look, remembering having been attacked on the train once and left under his invisibility cloak. He said, "I'll start in the front, you can start in the back. We can meet somewhere in the middle and visit some more with Neville and Luna when we're done."

Harry found a group of the first years having fun in the front of the train. He ignored the WWW logo and let them turn each other into canaries. He was especially heartened to see that they were sitting together as a class, rather than as a house. They waved at him as he walked by.

He and Hermione met in the middle of the train. She grinned wickedly at him as she removed her badge and then his. She pulled him into the loo. He snickered and said, "What is it with you and the loo?" He didn't get a chance to say much more as she was completely focused on snogging him.

Too soon it seemed they were in the outskirts of London. People hastily changed out of their wizarding garb and into jeans and t-shirts. He helped some of the younger students get their trunks off the train and onto trolleys, glad that their own luggage was already at their home.

To no one's surprise, there was a gaggle of reporters waiting. Harry spoke with them in an attempt to get the Grangers away safely. He greeted Alicia from Teen Witch Weekly warmly and asked to see her the next day, then went over and shook hands with Odd Lovegood. A few minutes later he looked around and saw that the others had made their way out of the station and apparated home.

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July 5

Fleur Weasley settled into bed ready for another night of being too uncomfortable to sleep. She was ready for the baby to be born. She was horrified at what being pregnant was doing to her body. For the first time in her life she felt unattractive. No matter what Bill said, she knew that she was ugly.

She cringed a little when she felt her abdomen cramping. She had been cramping for a couple hours. None of the books that she had could explain it to her and she figured it was a reaction to the spicy food that she and Bill had devoured.

Bill slid under the covers next to her. He kissed her once on the forehead and again where their unborn child was playing Quidditch in her abdomen. The baby gave him a hard thump and he laughed.

Fleur was extremely glad that her husband was an advisor at the bank instead of a curse breaker. It was nice to be able to have a home in London instead of a tent in the Egyptian desert. While she loved an adventure she would have never survived being pregnant in the sand.

She cramped again, this time harder. She ignored it but for scratching Thai food off her list of things she could eat. Bill was asleep already having spent most of his day sorting documents and working over Harry's investments. Apparently the dinner had not bothered him. She had not told him her fears of becoming a parent.

Fleur wanted so badly to speak to her mother. She wanted advice on sleeping while pregnant, what to expect when the baby came and what to do after the baby came. Molly had been a big help but it wasn't the same. In truth Fleur missed her mother madly and was terrified of what the future might hold.

Harry's defeat of Riddle had eased her mind a great deal. She had read about what had been done to babies during the first war and it made her want weep. The evilness of it all had haunted her since the moment she found out she was pregnant.

She cringed at the cramp. This one was pretty bad. It was odd since spicy food had not... Oh Merlin that hurt. She was horrified at the wetness that she felt flooding the bed. It took a few seconds to realize what it meant.

"Bill," she said shaking him. She was amazingly enough, calm.

“Huh?” he asked in a hazy voice. She sighed and wondered if all the Weasley men were this hard to awake.

“My wazer juz broke,” she told him. He hugged his pillow harder.

“Mmmm... That’s nice. I’ll fix it in the morning,” he murmured falling back asleep.

“BILL!” she said loudly.

“What?” he asked. At least this time his eyes were open.

“It’z time,” she hissed at him.

“Time for what?” he asked.

“Zee babeee. My waterz,” she told him motioning to the bed. He promptly fell out of bed.

She watched as Bill ran around the room trying to get dressed and retrieving her already packed bag at the same time. She went into the bathroom to clean up and change her clothes. Bill was hopping on one foot trying to slip one of her boots on.

She came back into the bedroom to find him dressed and ready to go. He nodded to her and grabbed her bag then he promptly disappeared. She grabbed the edge of the dresser holding on as another contraction gripped her insides.

Bill came back looking sheepish. He side-long apparated her to St. Mungos. Fifteen minutes later the second girl in four generations was born into the Weasley family.

The healers spoke of the easy time she had of it. She was made to have babies. Having ten would not be out of the question. The mediwitch who suggested it didn’t speak French but she didn’t need to. Fleur made her opinion very clear.

Bill summoned his parents to meet their first grandchild an hour later. She impressed them all with her amazing ability to yawn and kick her feet.

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Minerva McGonagall heard a bell ring and smiled. Another magical child had been born. She looked over the administrative papers she was attempting to sort through and then stood up. She always got curious and checked the name.

Francis Ginerva Weasley

Minerva smiled. She was willing to bet that little Francis was a future Gryffindor. She went back to her papers with a lighter heart.

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July 6

While the rest of the wizarding world celebrated, Emma and Dan poured over the latest issue of the Quibbler together. Lovegood had certainly been at the top of his game that morning. The moving photos told the chilling tale far better than any wordsmith could convey. There were images of Riddle's killing curses zooming by as Harry dodged or flattened himself out of their deadly path.

There were images of the golden shields, of Fred reflecting his away, and of the shop owner getting hit with a killing curse. Having seen them fired in person, Dan and Emma needed no reminder to tell them how swiftly death could strike.

They read on and saw the image of Hermione casting her otter Patronus and directing it at Riddle. The next image showed over fifty forms rushing at Voldemort. Then came the two images that would forever be etched in their minds, Hermione getting hit with the pale green jet of light and Harry's sword severing Riddle's head spraying Harry with his blood.

The final images showed Riddle's head and body feet from each other and Harry, Susan and Alyx frantically working to save their daughter while Harry's Phoenix bird did what she could.

Emma put down the paper feeling an anxiety attack coming on. She was short of breath and felt cold and clammy despite the warm weather. The only three people in the world who could help her at that moment happened to walk by. She pulled them into a bone-crushing hug that would have made Hagrid proud.

After a minute she whimpered, "The paper, did you see the...?"

Dan looked on and said, "They were there Em. They remember."

Dobby and Winky looked at the photos at the same time that thousands of witches and wizards across Britain were looking at Lovegood's photos. Dobby threw his arms around Harry's middle saying, "Harry Potter sir is the bravest wizard ever."

Holding Hermione Winky said, "Miss Hermione is bravest too." Hermione gently patted her shoulder.

... --- ...

For Harry, the hardest part of being knighted was selecting the twenty people to invite to the ceremony. In the end he picked, Dan, Emma, Molly, Arthur, Minerva, Hermione, Remus, Tonks Susan, Neville, Luna, Alyx, and Bob, Kingsley, Abraxan, Moody, Flitwick, Poppy, Diane and Jack.

The ceremony itself was brief. Abraxan made a speech for about five minutes and the Queen called Harry to come forward. Harry walked nervously up the carpeted walkway until he was a few feet in front of her. She asked to examine his sword, which he very carefully drew from the ceremonial scabbard and handed to her. Handing it back to him a minute later, she took her own ceremonial sword, which looked very similar to his and tapped him on the shoulder with it. She explained the knight's responsibilities to serve the Queen in times of need and to protect others as well as the privileges of knighthood then tapped him on the other shoulder with the flat edge.

The dinner was remarkably informal. The queen spoke with each of the guests as well as Harry. She had known of Voldemort and Grindelwald before, and realized the threat that dark wizards represented. Photographers were on hand to mark the event. To Harry's surprise, Odd Lovegood was on hand as well.

At the end of the dinner the Queen bid each of them farewell. It had been a night that they would always remember.

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The next day Harry and Hermione went back to the castle. Hermione had a bit of research that she wanted to do in the library and Harry wanted to talk with Dumbledore's painting.

Minerva was meeting with Flitwick and told him to go in.

Dumbledore was waiting for Harry and beamed at him when he arrived. "Ah, good morning, Sir Harry. May I offer you one of Minerva's lemon drops? She seems to have found time to fill the jar."

Harry took one and replied, "Thank you, Professor. It's good to talk with you again."

Dumbledore looked at Harry closely. He could see that Harry had aged from having shouldered such a tremendous burden. Yet at the same time, he looked happier and healthier than he'd ever known him to be. He asked, "So what's next, Harry?"

Harry replied, "We're planning a wedding in a month." After a moment Harry asked, "I wanted to ask you, what did you do with the Order after you defeated Grindelwald?"

Dumbledore replied, "There was much to be done, rounding up hundreds of stray supporters. I believe what you're really asking for is advice regarding what the role of the Order should be in 1998." Harry nodded and Dumbledore continued. "Without a specific enemy to battle, the members might logically assume a watchdog role for a while. You will have to assess the likelihood of other wizards trying to

fill the void that the defeat of Riddle might bring. There is little risk of the Order quickly degenerating into a social club, but as much as possible, your meetings should have a purpose, an agenda and action items. I would recommend reducing the frequency of the meetings if a serious potential threat hasn't been identified by the end of the year."

Harry nodded, realizing that the threat of Tom Riddle had grown right under Dumbledore's nose. He asked, "Professor, why didn't you put a stop to Riddle the night that he came back to the castle looking to teach defense?"

The twinkle disappeared from Dumbledore's eye. He replied, "I recognize that as one of the three largest mistakes that I'd made during my life. I was all but certain what he was becoming. It was the last time that I saw him until he publicly reemerged years later as Lord Voldemort."

Curiosity got the better of Harry. He asked, "Professor, what were the other two? What would you have done differently?"

Dumbledore replied, "I should have insisted that Sirius receive the benefit of a fair trial and I should have checked on your well-being from time to time as you were growing up. Both failures ultimately caused you pain, and for that I apologize. I wish you the benefit of learning from my mistakes at an early age. Please extend my best wishes to Hermione. I truly wish you the best Harry."

Harry stood and replied, "Thank you Professor."

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A week later a hastily thrown together memorial was being dedicated in Diagon Alley. Hermione and Harry had gone out of respect for all those who were lost. When the statue of themselves was unveiled, Harry lost his temper and blew it up with one curse. Hermione scathingly told the organizers that memorials were to remember those who had lost their lives to the dark. She had transfigured some of the rubble into a black granite wall and the crowd stood silently watching as she carved names into it.

Lily Potter, James Potter, Bertha Jenkins, Frank Bryce, Cedric Diggory, Sirius Black, Amelia Bones, Emmaline Vance, Albus Dumbledore, Percy Weasley, Ginny Weasley, Ron Weasley... She stopped when she got to Ron's name. She became so upset that Harry had to side-along apparate them home.

The next day the Daily Prophet ran the following article.

Potter and Granger Blow Up Memorial

By Reggie McDonald

Harry "the boy who lived" and Hermione "the girl who was allegedly hit with a killing curse and still breathes" blew up a war memorial in Diagon Alley yesterday. The statue, made of gold and imported marble was worth an undetermined number of Galleons. Apparently they were unhappy with the likenesses of themselves.

This reporter thinks that Potter and Granger are out of control. Aurors present at the disaster yesterday did nothing to stop them. Miss Granger transfigured a small portion of the rubble into a granite wall and began carving names into it.

She included a muggle and a convicted murderer. Is this the type of memorial we want our children's grandchildren to see?

Hermione tossed the paper at Harry. She gave him a quick snog. He watched her as she stood to leave the room. She smirked at him and said, "My nickname is longer than yours."

Harry just laughed and shook his head as his love left to meet Emma at a dress shop.

... --- ...

True to her word, Abraxan offered the MLE Director job to Kingsley who accepted. John Thomas' year was up and he was looking forward to getting back to Brisbane and into the SAS.

Kingsley's first actions were to try and secure the services of Remus and Moody. He wanted Moody to work part time as a fighting skill-building consultant for some of the aurors as he had done for the most recent class of cadets. Moody wasn't anxious to take the position, nor did he have any real need to earn more gold. Kingsley had to sweeten the deal by offering him a free lunch each day that he worked. With the details ironed out, the Master Auror agreed to start the next Monday.

Remus would prove to be harder to bring on board, not because he wasn't willing, rather because of obstacles put in place years earlier by Umbridge and Fudge. There were still laws in place that prevented him from being hired into any but the most menial positions. Fortunately Kingsley had learned a few tricks of the trade in his year assisting the PM. He offered Remus a contract position as acting MLE Liaison. He funded the position through an interdepartmental account transfer, but Remus technically reported to Jack Turnbull's department. It was a three-week a month position, and Remus was delighted.

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Susan struggled out of the muggle dress wondering why she had agreed to this. It was the seventh dress in the third shop. If they didn't find something they could all agree on soon she was going to apparate home and seal herself in her room. Susan had discovered that getting Hermione, Emma, Molly and Diane to agree on anything was a cursed job.

She pulled her shirt on and swore as she ripped the sleeve. It was her favorite shirt and it had been mended by magic so many times that magic was going to stop working soon. Soon came quicker than she thought, as she couldn't fix it. She sat down hard and pressed her face in her hands.

"Hello?" said a voice outside the door.

"Yes?" Susan asked.

"You okay in there?" the voice asked.

“Not really. I ripped my shirt,” Susan confessed. The voice laughed softly.

“Give it here. I’ll fix it in a jiff,” she said. Susan pulled it off and handed it over the door. A few minutes later Hermione was handing back her shirt. There was a very nice looking woman with her.

“That was quick. Thank you,” Susan told her.

“No worries. You’d be surprised how often it happens. Did you find a dress?” she asked. Hermione sighed.

“No,” Susan responded dejectedly.

The woman laughed and said, “Oh come on now. It can’t be that bad. My sister picked the dress I had to wear in her wedding. It was hideous. At least you get some input.”

“Hideous?” Susan asked.

“Pink. Designed like a tutu with kilometers of lace and it itched like you would not believe. I’m Caroline by the way,” she said.

“Hermione. This is my sister Susan. And that’s horrible,” Hermione said with a shudder.

“Yes, it was. I burned it as soon as I could get out of it,” Caroline said as they went back into the shop. Molly fussed over Susan’s shirt.

“Really Susan. You should get some new clothes. How old is this shirt?” Molly asked.

“It was my mum’s,” Susan confessed. Molly backed off a little. She examined the tear.

“Nice work on the seam,” she said.

“Thank you. I get plenty of practice at university,” Caroline said.

"You go to university for sewing?" Diane asked her brow wrinkling.

She laughed and replied, "Oh no. I learned to sew from my mum. I'm in medical school."

"Ah sutures. The joys of being an intern," Emma commented.

"I'm not that far yet but practice I must. We have a few dresses that aren't displayed. Would you like me to go get them for you?" she asked. Susan sighed loudly and agreed.

"If I didn't love you sister of mine I would tell you and Harry where to get off the train," Susan said as Caroline returned with a rack of dresses. Hermione immediately began going through them. Susan joined her grudgingly.

Then they found it. It was perfect.

"Look at this," Susan said holding it up.

"Beautiful," Diane commented.

"The neckline is a bit low don't you think?" Emma asked.

"A bit?" Molly asked.

"Try it on," Hermione said. Emma rolled her eyes at Molly who tossed up her hands and shook her head.

The dress was a vintage style. It was antique gold lace over a white base made of silk. It had a Gryffindor red waist sash and shawl. The neckline wasn't as low as it looked on the hanger.

"You look like a Goddess," Hermione commented when Susan came out of the dressing room.

"Which one?" Susan asked in amusement. She could remember a time when a comment like that from Hermione would have sent her over the moon. She looked in the mirror and adjusted the dress.

“Venus,” Diane said.

“Aphrodite,” Caroline murmured under her breath. Susan heard her but no one else did.

Susan agreed to the dress and Hermione purchased it even over Molly and Emma’s protests. Caroline said that with the alterations it would be a little less revealing. She took some measurements from Susan and then they left. Almost halfway to the car Susan gasped. She had left her handbag at the store. She went back to get it alone.

She left the store with her bag and Caroline’s phone number. Now if she could only figure out how to use her cell phone.

... --- ...

After they had been home a few days Emma began to get restless. The Ministry had not received a request to place the Potters as they were collectively known on any sort of protective detail. Emma wanted to return to work. Thus the subject came up at dinner.

“I called Cynthia and Betty about reopening the practice.”

Practically stunned at her words, Hermione replied, “What?”

Emma calmly explained, “I called the hygienists Cynthia Cutter and Betty Pullman to see if they were interested in coming back to work with us again.”

Hermione came unglued. “You can’t possibly be serious. The last time the Death Eaters thought you two were at work, two people were tortured and killed. What about security? I can’t allow it.”

Harry remained silent knowing Hermione’s concerns but remembering Sirius’ imprisonment in this very home.

Emma looked angry. Certainly she was frustrated. Dan looked at the two headstrong women that he loved. Hopefully their two former employees were too busy to come back. He asked, “What did they say dear?”

Emma replied, "Cynthia was available part time. Betty was working full time already."

Hermione fired back, "Mum, what part of no don't you understand? Riddle had a million pound reward out for Dad's head. It's too dangerous."

Emma replied, "Hermione, I never tried to stop you from being a witch. It's who you are. I'm a surgeon. Can't you understand that?"

"But the Death Eaters. They're..."

"Gone dear. You and Harry and the others got rid of them. The others scattered with the wind."

Harry hoped there was some middle ground. He said, "When things looked bad last year, Minister Scrimgeour asked Kingsley to keep an eye on the Prime Minister by serving as some sort of aide. Could I hire someone to...?"

Emma cut him off, replying, "No. Thank you Harry. We just need some part of our life back. Harry remembered how Hermione was suffocating in the hospital wing and nodded. She said, "I'll wear my armor vest and keep my emergency portkey with me."

"But..."

"We'll be moving back into our new home in a month or so. You and Hermione will be married soon. You can play golf with Dan three times a week, but we need to get back to our lives. You two have a million opportunities in front of you. You'll be too busy."

"But..."

As if to prove her point, Dobby popped in carrying a sack of letters that was twice as large as he was and Winky had one nearly as large as she was. "Your mail, Sir and Miss."

Dan and Emma got up and Emma said, "Enjoy your evening. We love you both."

... --- ...

Emma stepped from the bathroom still towel drying her hair. She glanced at Dan. He was sitting in what had become known as his chair, reading a book. She looked around their room. Number twelve had felt different after they had returned from the castle. That had been two weeks ago and the house had never felt more like a home.

But it wasn't their home. Their house in Crawley was finally being rebuilt. In another month she and Dan would be there. Their lives would never be the same but it would be nice to be in their home again.

Dan looked up at her and smirked. She rolled her eyes but crossed the room and kissed him. He tossed the book on to the floor and pulled his wife on to his lap.

"Daniel!" She objected as he tugged at the opening of her dressing gown. She playfully smacked his hand and he grinned.

"I just wanted to see what you had on under this," he said with a look that she knew well.

"You can find out later. You need to shower and get to the course and I need to get to the surgery," she told him as she attempted to get up. He tightened his grip around her abdomen and buried his face in her shoulder.

After a few kisses on her neck and a nibble on her ear she quit trying to get up. Then he kissed her ear.

"I love you," he said softly. He had made it a point to tell her that every morning since they had married.

"I love you too," Emma responded with a soft kiss.

Dan held on for another minute and then helped her off his lap. He went to shower and she finished getting dressed. She heard him singing that Sonny and Cher song again. He insisted that it was their song. She thought it was his song. She had heard it in one form or another after almost every time they made love.

Daniel Granger had many quirks and she loved them all, even if it meant having that song in her head all day. There were much worse things in life.

They had opened their practice up the week before. She had seen patients for half a day, as had her husband. It was slow after the year off but their patients were coming back. When asked, they said that a family emergency had taken them out of the country.

... --- ...

"An interesting chapter," Mr. Crow said McGonagall. "But there seem to be a number of loose ends. What's next?"

Crow mumbled something about honeymoon activities, taking the time to write a review, and drafting an outline for a sequel.

McGonagall didn't hear him and asked him to repeat himself.

Crow handed her a 41 page chapter and replied, "Happy Christmas, Professor."

Chapter 28

July 9

Harry and Susan had taken Emma and Dan to Diagon Alley to look at possible sites for Susan. She wanted to open an ice cream shop. They walked up and down the alley. Bill had mentioned having purchased two buildings when they had talked with him last but both were better suited for retail than a food shop.

The Weasley twins had expressed interest in leasing one, as it was quite a bit larger than the one that they currently rented. Their business was literally booming with the sale of fireworks. It seemed that the celebrations would never end. Fred and George knew that it would not last forever but it gave them the capital for expansion of space and product line. The Professors at Hogwarts next year were in for a real treat.

They walked to the burned-out site of the old Fortescue shop. The place always made him think of Aunt Marge blowing up like a balloon. With half a smirk Harry said, "I spent a week here once. Mr. Fortescue kept treating me to sundaes and telling me stories."

Dan looked around and said, "Susan, it's the best site in the area for what you want." They had taken Hermione here once for ice cream before her first year and remembered it fondly.

Susan looked apprehensive. It was a great site, but the rent was likely to be a lot more expensive in the center of the alley than along the fringes where the new shops usually sprang up. Also the building needed a lot of work. She said, "Maybe we should look at the little one at the end again."

Harry sensed her unease and said, "Let's go talk with Bill. I asked about this property a while ago but I don't know what happened with the transaction. He'll let us know who owns it and if it's available."

It was a beautiful day. Dan said, "If you don't mind, we'll wait here. It's nice out and we enjoy people watching."

Susan conjured two chairs for them and smiled.

Harry replied, "We'll be back in fifteen minutes."

They walked to Gringotts, asked to see Bill and were shown in to his office immediately. He was visiting with Griphook. "Good afternoon, Mr. Potter, Miss Bones," said Griphook. "How may we serve you?"

"Hi Griphook. Hi Bill. I was wondering what happened with the old Fortescue site that I asked you to look into?"

Bill grinned and said, "As of a week ago, you own it. What would you like to do with it?"

Harry explained that Susan wanted to open an ice cream shop and asked, "How much would startup expenses be?"

Bill replied "Twenty," implying twenty thousand galleons as it had been largely destroyed by Death Eaters.

Harry nodded and said, "Please re-deed it, add one hundred to her account and help her with anything that she needs."

Bill looked at Harry for a moment and he nodded silent confirmation of Bill's unspoken questions. Bill said, "It will be done before you leave the bank. What else?"

Harry said, "Nothing today. We need to get back to the house. Thanks Bill. Thanks Griphook." Bill would add one hundred thousand galleons to Susan's vault, sign the deed to the property over to her and find a builder to do the restorations.

Susan looked on, not certain what she'd witnessed, but replied, "Thank you." They walked out of the bank and Susan again said, "Thank you, Harry."

Harry gently squeezed her arm and replied, "No worries, Sis. Bill will help you with anything that you might need. I was taking business classes from them all year. They're really helpful."

As they were approaching Dan and Emma, one of the new second year Gryffindors saw him and dragged his mum over to say hi. Soon there was a rather large crowd standing a respectful distance away looking on. No one noticed the angry blond haired man slip by.

... --- ...

As Harry and Susan were visiting Bill, Flitwick looked over the Daily Prophet with unusual satisfaction.

What now?

By Molly Weasley

The question on everyone's lips these days is what the future holds for the 'defenders of the light'. So far the boy and girl who lived have kept mum on their plans. It was previously reported that they are engaged to be married. This fact seems to be supported by the lovely ring that Miss Hermione Granger was seen wearing when she and Sir Harry Potter destroyed the tacky memorial that in no way represented the lives lost in the recent war.

A few of the defenders have however announced plans.

Miss Luna Lovegood, daughter of Mr. Odd Lovegood, this publications direct competitor, has joined forces with Mr. Rubeus Hagrid, current Care of Magical Creatures Professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and wizardry. They plan on opening a 'zoo' of magical creatures. A zoo is a muggle concept that allows people to view and study animals in their natural habitats. Sir Potter has purchased 10,000 acres of land on the southwest side of Hogwarts to help the two with their project.

Miss Padma Patil has accepted a Magical Medical Apprenticeship with Master Healer Poppy Pomfrey at Hogwarts. Her course of study will be four years.

Mr. Dean Thomas, roommate to the boy who lived and member of Sir Potter's so called Defense Association has accepted a position at the Ministry of Magic. He will be working as a public relations liaison.

Mr. Seamus Finnigan, also a member of the so called Defense Association, has taken Sir Potter up on his offer of business funding and is opening a pub near his home in Dublin.

Auror Nymphadora Tonks-Lupin has been promoted to the Chief Investigator of the Magical Law Enforcement division. She has hand picked a team of elite investigators that include Auror Bob Sunset as well as newly confirmed Aurors Richard Chambers and Alyx.

Auror Lupin's husband Remus, a former Hogwarts Defense against the Dark Arts Professor, has filled the job as acting MLE ambassador to the muggle government. This is a controversial posting as it is currently illegal for werewolves to be employed by the ministry. Mr. Kingsley Shacklebolt, the new director of the MLE, has challenged the law and the Wizengamot has agreed to hear the case next week. Shacklebolt was quoted as saying, "Just because someone is infected with Lycanthropy does not mean they are a monster." Mr. Shacklebolt has circumvented the law for the moment by funding the appointment through unusual means.

Professor Minerva McGonagall will remain Head Mistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. She has a great number of positions to fill. She had no comments on her current candidates.

As you can see from this article Mr. Reggie McDonald is no longer editor of the Daily Prophet. Sir Potter recently claimed the one million-galleon reward that our parent corporation TDP Ltd offered for the death of the dark lord three years ago. It bankrupted the paper and Sir Potter immediately bought out the remaining interest. He has split the ownership between Mrs. Molly Weasley, Mrs. Fleur Weasley, Doctor Daniel Granger, Doctor Emma Granger and a group of Hogwarts students who were orphaned by Voldemort and the Death Eaters. Miss Susan Bones has agreed to represent the orphans' interest for the first term on the firm's board of directors along with the other four owners.

Mrs. Weasley will oversee daily operations. She plans on keeping the current staff in place. She was quoted as saying, "The role of the Daily Prophet is to report the news, not create it. We will strive to

consistently put out accurate and balanced stories clearly separating news articles from editorials. The Daily Prophet will also publish stories from the nonmagical world that ordinary witches and wizards should be aware of.

Flitwick was glad that Harry had purchased the business, removed McDonald as editor and grateful that he had given Molly such an opportunity.

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July 9 - Monte Carlo

The plan was very simple and set to execute flawlessly. Lucius had obtained a forged copy of his British passport and enough identification to be passable. He was listed as a wealthy British Expat currently working in Romania. He had deposited ten million pounds sterling in the casino account the week before drawn from a Barclays account from Nice.

The irony was that most of the money that he had deposited had previously been stolen from the Southampton branch of the same bank. Malfoy was met at the Monte Carlo airport and driven in a stretch limousine to the hotel. An hour later he left the hotel and apparated back to the airport where Draco was waiting.

"Come Draco," said Lucius as they made their way to the men's room. Once inside they did a quick check to verify that it was empty and side-apparated to a location a quarter mile away from their hotel.

Adjusting the invisibility cloak, Draco carefully followed his father into the hotel and up to their room. Lucius casually noted the eye in the sky cameras that were all over the hotel including the elevators and the hallways into the sleeping rooms. Twenty-five years ago he had pulled this scam once before though on a much smaller scale. It had been the beginning of his family wealth.

Lucius explained the layout of the casino and that he would be playing at one of the high limit roulette tables. While under the invisibility cloak, Draco was to carefully charm 15 of the 18 black slots

so that the roulette ball would not land on those spaces. When Lucius was done playing Draco was to immediately take off the charm.

"I get it. Why can't I play?"

"You have to be twenty-one to play the table games in the casino. Do not argue with me. I agreed to help you when we are finished here. Are you ready?"

Pacified, Draco replied, "Yes Father."

They left the room with Draco under the cloak and walked into the salon. The host immediately walked up to Lucius and said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Malfoy. Which game are you interested in playing?"

Lucius replied in a friendly manner, "I will test my luck at roulette. Thank you."

Woodruff the host pointed to the five dealers who were lined up. They each were wearing a starched white shirt, black trousers and had a small black dealer's apron on around their beltline. "Who would you like as your dealer, Mr. Malfoy?"

Malfoy eyed them for a moment and selected the pretty blond with above the shoulder hair. If she hadn't been a filthy muggle he might have been attracted to her. She introduced herself, "Good evening sir. My name is Susan. I'll be your dealer."

Malfoy nodded and Woodruff asked, "What amount and denomination of tiles would you like, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Hundred thousand pound tiles, please. Five million will do for now."

Lucius sat at the seat nearest the outside red and black squares. A moment later a pretty server asked him if he would like a beverage. Lucius replied, "Single malt, please."

A moment later, Woodruff brought the tiles and Lucius signed for them. He took a step back and said, "Good luck, Mr. Malfoy." A moment later Lucius placed five of the tiles on the outside red square

and carefully folded his hands on the top of table. The dealer expertly spun the pill around the inside rim of the wheel.

After a moment, the dealer waved her hand over the table and said, "No more bets."

The eye in the sky security operator was watching the game and saw nothing of interest as the pill landed on 35 black. The dealer placed the red crystal marker on the 35 square and swept the tiles from the table. A moment later, she picked up the crystal and said, "Place your bets." Malfoy remained expressionless and placed five more tiles on red and refolded his hands on the table.

Meanwhile Draco had charmed six of the eighteen black numbers and was about to do 13 black when the dealer spun the wheel and spun the pill in a clock ways motion.

"Fifteen black." She repeated the motion. Malfoy counted his tiles and took a sip of his scotch to give Draco more time in between spins. After about fifteen seconds he placed twenty of the tiles on red. He was a million pounds down with two million as the current bet.

The dealer said, "Good luck sir," and began to spin the pill along the inside rim of the wheel. It landed on 34 red. She matched the stack of tiles that he had on red with another stack from the casino. He was a million up.

Malfoy took another sip of his scotch and placed the stack that she had given him on top of his own, making the bet four million. Draco had charmed the black slots on the wheel through 24 black.

The dealer spun the wheel, waved her hand over the table and said, "No more bets. Good luck." A few seconds later the pill landed on 1 red. She matched his stack and waited. Malfoy was five million up with eight million on the table. Malfoy carefully stacked the tiles and indicated that he was ready to spin again.

The dealer spun the pill, waved her hand over the table and stepped back from the wheel. The eye in the sky operator watched carefully as the pill tripped on the spinning wheel and landed on eighteen red.

She matched his eighty tiles with eighty from the casino. He was thirteen million up. Malfoy looked at the tiles for a moment and nodded. He smiled and said, "Perhaps I'll be lucky again tomorrow." He pushed his stack of tiles across to the dealer, ending the game and said, "I think I'll go have dinner. Thank you."

Woodruff and the dealer each replied, "Thank you, sir. The pleasure was ours." They had been trained to congratulate a winner and show profound respect to a loser.

Draco whispered "Finite Incantatem," and waited by the door.

Woodruff watched as the dealer carefully counted the tiles. Within five minutes, Lucius had cheated the casino out of thirteen million pounds. On the other side of the salon a wealthy Japanese man had lost nearly the same amount in the course of a half hour. The casino knew that in the long run math would beat luck. The house advantage in single-zero roulette was about three percent. The Englishman had won today, but most likely would be back someday and would lose. Woodruff handed the slip for Malfoy to sign and accepted the clipboard back after Malfoy had signed the chips-in ticket. Malfoy finished his scotch and walked out of the salon.

Malfoy was a bit annoyed when the concierge offered to escort him to a dinner table. Lucius replied, "Perhaps I'll go up to my room first and freshen up for a few minutes." The concierge offered to escort him to his room, but Lucius waved him off replying, "I would like a window table in thirty minutes."

The concierge nodded and walked away. Malfoy made his way to the elevator, waited until everyone had gotten out before getting in and went back to his room. Draco silently followed behind. Malfoy opened the door and closed it after they both walked in.

Draco took off the invisibility cloak, smirked and said, "That was so easy. We should do it again tomorrow."

Lucius shook his head and said, "I will briefly play a fair game tomorrow for lower stakes so I will be welcome to come back another day. I will check out tomorrow at noon. I need to go have dinner at

their restaurant I will return and order something from room service for you when I return. Wait here.”

Draco said, “Why can’t I come with you?”

“You aren’t a registered guest here. I don’t want to raise suspicion. Do as you’re told.” There was no room for negotiation in his voice.

Two hours later, Lucius returned and said, “The server will be bringing up desert in a few minutes. Put the cloak back on.”

The next morning, Lucius went back into the casino salon and signed for a million in chips. He played seven hands, winning four and losing three before cashing in. He collected his certified checks and left a few minutes later in the hotel limousine. Draco apparated to the men’s room at the airport and they took their flight back to Bucharest.

Malfoy deposited the checks in Barclays, slightly more than thirteen million pounds richer for the weekend’s work. In the course of a month he had reacquired well over half of his previous wealth. Even better, he had effectively laundered the money that he deposited into his account. The money would go a long way in achieving his long term goals.

Draco, while realizing that the scam had worked perfectly, had his own ideas on growing his own pile of gold. He was under no delusions that Lucius was going to share. The ten thousand pounds that his father had handed him was nothing. His plan, while making him extremely wealthy, would also accomplish another goal. The Dark Lord had personally taught him how to use fear to further his goals. When he was finished his enemies would know the true meaning of fear. The money was just lemon in the sherbet.

Lucius had always told him to set several short term goals that would lead to the bigger prize. He had five steps planned out perfectly. The first step involved a muggle and a whole lot of pain.

... --- ...

Saturday morning Emma was fixing the teeth of Jimmy Thornton during an emergency appointment. Jimmy had been bouncing on the bed with his sister Kimmy when he had fallen off and landed face first in the bedside table. Not really face first, more like teeth first she decided as she worked him over. However, the procedure didn't take nearly as long as she thought it would.

It was nice to be back to work. She had missed the practice a lot. She and her husband had spent years building it. It would take a while to get it back to where they had been. Emma wasn't sure she wanted to get back to the point of doing dental work five days a week. However, it was nice to be able to use her surgical skills.

She shut the door behind the newly fixed and still numb Jimmy, the not so sorry I pushed him Kimmy and their frazzled mum. The bell on the doorjamb jangled and Emma smiled at it. She had missed that sound.

She locked the door and started back to the operating room. She had let her assistant leave after the procedure was complete. She started to hum Dan's awful song in the silence as she began to sort the tools she had used into the correct bins. Her mind was on the shopping trip she and her daughters were going to be taking this afternoon. Hermione needed a wedding dress and they were going to make a spectacular attack on the shops of London. Molly, Lisa and Diane were joining them.

She glanced down at her hand to look at the mothers ring and frowned. It was on her desk in the ugly bowl Hermione had made in primary school along with her engagement and wedding rings. She never operated with them on.

Shrugging mentally she picked up the scalpel and was about to dispose of it when she heard the bell on the doorjamb ring. She froze waiting for someone to call out her name. When that didn't happen she slipped the scalpel in her lab jacket and slowly started towards her office. Her wedding ring was her emergency portkey.

Emma heard footsteps and looked up to see a young man standing before her. She recognized him instantly and before she could pull

her hand out of her pocket with the only weapon she had, he pointed his wand at her and said, "Stupefy."

She flew backwards into the wall, her head slamming against the dry wall.

Draco Malfoy smiled cruelly as he approached the muggle. He was going to have such fun with the mudblood's mother. He stood next to her prone form and smirked. This time he didn't have to share. He looked around the room deciding a good place to start.

Emma's head was pounding. She could feel the blood flowing from a cut in her hand. She gripped the handle of the scalpel tighter. She watched Malfoy look around through half closed eyes.

Emma Young had been born to Gloria and Andrew Young in early September during a freak snowstorm. Refusing to wait until her father had managed to get them to the hospital she had come out kicking and screaming. Her father claimed that he knew the moment he saw her that she was going to be feisty and free spirited. This was not always a good thing when your father was in the military.

By the time Emma had finished school and was ready for university her father was a three star Lieutenant General with the Royal Marines. Dan was not joking about him being a scary man. He had chased away every one of her boyfriends except for Jackson Turnbull, who he loved to death and Daniel Granger who she loved to death.

Andrew had started teaching her self defense when she was five. By the time Emma was seven she knew how to fight off both of her older brothers. She never really had to put her skills to the test and until the magical war she had basically forgotten about them. Emma was suddenly very glad she and Diane had gotten a couple lessons on personal defense from Alyx. It was a nice refresher and some of the things her father had taught her had come back.

If at all possible run away, Alyx had told them. If you can't run away then disable your attacker. If you get his wand then all he has left are his fists. You can use your wand to stop them. Emma couldn't and neither could Diane but there was a lesson there. Get the wand.

Use anything you can as a weapon, Alyx had lectured. Rocks, sticks, hands and feet. Whatever is easiest and works best for you. Trust your instincts.

Emma's instincts were telling her that this boy was going to kill her but not before she wished she were dead.

Draco leaned over her and put the wand next to her head. His insane smile changed to shock as she grabbed the wand with her left hand and slashed at his throat with the scalpel. She missed but managed to slice a large gash in his cheek. Using the floor as leverage she snapped his wand and it made a spectacular cracking noise. She scrambled to her feet and attempted to run.

Draco's pain turned to fury and he grabbed her by the throat. He again slammed her against the wall. The hand not gripping her throat grabbed her wrist and squeezed it. She gripped the scalpel tighter knowing he would have to break her right arm to get her to let go.

His right hand was cutting off her air supply. Using her left hand she clawed at his hand, wrist and then his face as she felt the room getting warmer. He laughed at her as her eyes began to bug out. Desperate she began to flail her feet around. He loosened his grip and she gasped for air. He leaned close to her face so that she was gasping in his breath. She could smell the blood running from his wounded face.

"You're not going to die that easily," he sneered at her. Laughing at her expression he snarled, "Oh no. I have plans for the nasty muggle."

He suddenly let go of her throat and brought his fist down across the bridge of her nose. It made a horrible noise as it shattered and blood began to gush from both of her nostrils. She felt her eyes swelling up.

She was shaking in terror when Draco reared back and then slammed his fist into her ribcage. He howled in pain and looked at his bruised hand. Still gripping her right wrist he tore at her blood stained shirt.

“Dragonhide,” he muttered, disgusted. “What a waste, protection for a filthy muggle.” That explained why the stunning spell had not worked. No matter, he would take the vest from her. It would be a nice thing to taunt Potter with. He slowly unzipped it revealing her bra underneath. She could hear her own heartbeat.

As his hand groped her Emma tried to figure out how to get free. She was scared half out of her mind and tried pushing him away with her left hand but he was stronger. She grabbed him by the hair and pulled.

Draco grabbed her other wrist and held it tightly too. Emma met his eyes and he leaned in and attempted to kiss her. She turned her head struggling to free her arms.

“You nasty bitch. Don’t you turn from me,” he snarled into her ear. He twisted her left wrist and she inhaled sharply. Emma choked on her own blood. Draco continued to twist her wrist until he heard a cracking sound. She was screaming then and he felt his pleasure rising.

He let go of her now broken wrist and grabbed her jaw. Forcing her to face him he again went in for a kiss. Emma was horrified when he pulled back and her blood was on his face mixing with his own bleeding wound. She felt the fear choking her just as the blood running from her nose was.

Draco grabbed her shirt and vest and attempted to pull them off her left side. Emma struggled with him. After a minute her broken wrist was pinned behind her by her clothing. She whimpered in pain and fear as he pushed her against the wall harder. He pressed up against her so that she couldn’t move.

“How does it feel to know you are going to die a very painful death?” He asked her in an almost conversational tone. His face was inches from hers. He snickered at her reaction.

“Not just you either. I’m going to have so much fun torturing the mudblood in front of Potter. I can’t wait to see him break, as his filthy

little girlfriend is tortured. I'm going to use the Cruciatus curse on her. Do you know what that feels like? A thousand knives all tearing you apart at the same time. Maybe I'll leave her alive but insane. The smartest witch in 500 years loses her mind. She can room with Longbottom's crazy parents. A tribute to my Aunt Bella. She was a great witch. Followed the cause, fought for and died for the cause. Your filthy muggle husband killed her. It's only fitting that I kill you," he told her. She doubled her efforts to free her hands but he held tight.

"I'm not going to kill you just yet though. I could use some galleons. How much do you think Potter would pay to get his mudblood's filthy muggle mum back? I know you're a worthless piece of rubbish but what are you worth to him?" He asked tracing his finger over the strap of her bra.

He exposed her breast by roughly tearing her bra away. Emma choked on more blood and began to cry harder. Draco slapped her across the face and told her to shut up. Her right hand was numb from his grip but she still held the scalpel.

She was terrified at what he was doing to her. He bent down and gently licked her exposed nipple with his tongue. She sucked more of her own blood into her lungs when she gasped and tried to struggle away.

Her crying turned to screams when he bit down hard drawing blood. His laughter chilled her even more. He grabbed her by the throat once more and threw her to the floor. Emma landed hard and before she could move his soft Italian leather shoe was impacting her exposed ribs. He kicked her four times before she managed to roll over and bring the vest and tattered shirt back around her body.

Draco reared his foot back and kicked her again. This time in the backside and then her legs. Emma curled into a ball trying to let the vest protect as much of her body as possible. He just kept kicking her in any place he could.

After a couple of minutes he walked around her and looked down. Draco saw the terror in the muggle woman's eyes. He loved it when they got that look. He was about to kick her in the face when he was

reminded, cruelly, that he had not been able to get her to drop the oddly shaped knife.

Emma heard him scream as she sliced through the Achilles tendon on his left ankle. Draco hit the floor next to her and she rolled the opposite direction. She gasped as her tender ribcage hit the floor. He managed to grab her legs and using his good one for leverage pulled her back towards him. They were both screaming in pain, and she in terror too.

He managed to get her feet almost to his face when he looked down. She still had the knife. Draco was ready to kick her again.

Emma Granger was a talented dental surgeon. Incisions in the mouth are tricky. One through clothing and on a body part she had not studied in years was even harder. Emma brought the knife up his leg at an odd angle and slid the blade under the kneecap on his right leg. She then did something no doctor attempting to fix a knee would do. She twisted the blade so that it would stand parallel to his leg and snapped the blade off.

Draco screamed and let go of her legs. She kicked him in the head a couple times and struggled to get away from him.

Her ribs hurt badly and Emma knew from the tunnel vision that she was experiencing that she was about to pass out. She had to get to her office. The door had a lock. The desk had a phone. The bowl held a portkey.

Emma lay fifteen feet from her attacker trying to catch her breath. Her nose was still bleeding and she could hardly move. Draco howled in pain at first but then his endorphins kicked in and adrenaline started to block the pain. She struggled to sit up.

I have to get out of here, Emma thought wildly as she forced herself to kneel. She choked again as she staggered to her feet. She grabbed the wall with her right hand to steady herself leaving a messy red handprint when she was finally able to move from the spot.

Draco, being the brain surgeon he was, attempted to stand. His heel and knee both gave out and he crashed to the floor screaming in pain and fury. She stumbled against the wall fighting to stay conscious.

Draco dragged himself almost to where she was standing trying to catch her breath. She knew that if he got a hold of her again she was going to die. She looked around for another weapon and her eyes happened upon a tank of gas. Nitrous oxide.

She flashed back to Hermione's first and only cavity. She had slept for almost a day when given the nitrous oxide gas. The mask had crossed her face just once and she could have only breathed it in once before passing out. After finding out about her magic they had chalked it up to being something to not mix with a magical person.

Emma turned the release valve on full and grappled with the hose. Draco was still on the floor coming at her. She grabbed the mask and bent over him. Her ribs protested and she fell to the floor with a sound that was half scream, half sob. He grabbed for her and she pushed the bright orange mask over his face holding on for dear life. After one breath he was unconscious. After two he twitched a couple times. She let go and moved for the door.

The mask fell away but he didn't move.

Crying hysterically she crawled on her knees to her office. It was slow moving. Her left wrist was broken. Her right hand was cut badly. She vomited her breakfast, blood and the mucus she had swallowed twice before she got to the doorway.

The door to her office read Doctor Emma Granger, LDS MDS MGDS. She felt dizzy as she saw her qualifications on the door. The Bachelor of Dental Surgery, Master of Dental Surgery and Membership in General Dental Surgery were of little use at the moment.

One inside her office she collapsed against the door and locked it. Still crying but no longer completely hysterical she steadied herself. Her desk was five feet away and she could see the bowl from where she was kneeling.

Five feet. 'Accio bowl,' she thought, never in her life wishing more than then that she could do magic. She struggled to move and managed a short burst.

Four feet. She grasped her ribs and sobbed twice. 'Cry later,' she thought.

Three feet. She stumbled a bit on her knees and then righted herself.

Two feet. She could hear him moving. 'Damn,' she thought panicking.

One foot. She stumbled again in her haste and renewed terror. She hit the desk with her shoulder but remained upright.

Emma reached up and grabbed the bowl with her bleeding right hand. She fumbled with her rings and then gripped them against the bleeding wound. She spit out the blood in her mouth and choked out the word.

"Homefire."

The pull at her navel had become more familiar. She had gotten better at landing but not this time. She slammed into the dining room floor at number twelve with a thud.

"MUM!" Emma heard Hermione scream.

She looked up to see her daughter. Daughters. Susan was there too. With Lisa, Molly and Diane. They were supposed to go dress shopping, Emma thought hazily. The last thing she heard was her daughter giving orders and starting a diagnostic spell. Then everything went black.

... --- ...

Harry lifted his clubs into the boot of Dan's car. It had been a nice round. They had avoided all discussions on the upcoming wedding. Remus and Jack had rounded out the foursome. Remus had an unfair strength advantage that was evened out by the fact that he had driven the ball straight only one time during the round.

Harry turned his cell phone on and watched it boot up. It was habit to check his messages as soon as he got off the course. He also wanted to tease Hermione about trying on dresses. He knew that she was not looking forward to it.

He hit the keys for his messages and his three companions teased him about already being married. Remus was the first to notice the smile leave his face.

"What is it Harry?" he asked noting the seriousness in the young man's eyes. When Harry swore loudly the other three men were shocked.

"Emma's been hurt," Harry said grabbing his future father in law by the arm. He apparated them to the doorstep of number twelve. Remus was right behind him with Jack.

Harry burst into the door running. Dan almost ran him over when he stopped dead at the sight in the living room. He heard a strangled noise come from Dan and looked at him. In that moment he saw his friend's heart break.

Hermione was sitting on the couch. Emma was lying with her head in her daughter's lap. Her face and neck were bruised horribly. Her left arm was wrapped in a bandage. Her eyes were swollen closed. Hermione was stroking her hair. Diane was sitting on the floor next to the couch holding Emma's other hand, which was also bandaged, gently. Across the room Susan sat on a chair with her knees pulled to her chest.

Dan brushed by Harry almost knocking him down. He dropped to his knees next to Hermione's legs and looked at his best friend.

"Emmy?" he said softly. Hermione knew that her father only ever used that name when they were being intimate. She knew that it was something between just the two of them and she felt her heart tear at her chest. He slowly reached to touch Emma's face but stopped short for fear of hurting her. She must have sensed it because she dropped

Diane's hand and reached for him. She opened her eyes and squinted at him. The light hurt but she couldn't look away.

"Dear God, my love. What happened?" he whispered. His wife's face scrunched up and he saw that she was going to cry. He leaned over and kissed her forehead and shushed her. "That's not important right now. I'm here, love. I'm here," he repeated.

Susan, Diane and Hermione were all crying freely.

"Mum. You need to rest. Daddy will help you upstairs," Hermione told her. Emma closed her eyes and then slowly sat up.

Harry watched Dan walk Emma to the staircase. He followed her up the stairs as if she were a small child, standing behind her but letting her do it on her own. When they disappeared from the landing Harry turned back to Hermione.

His fiancé had buried her face in her hands and was shaking. He sat down next to her and pulled her into a hug. Hermione began to sob.

More than anything the lost look on Diane's face scared Harry.

... --- ...

Dan followed his wife to their room. She stopped in the doorway and looked around for a second. Then she walked over to his chair. She sat down and reached for her shoes. Noting her grimace and the way she sat back up quickly he hurried to help her.

There was nothing sexual about his undressing her. He removed her shoes, blood stained pants and then the tattered shirt. He suspected that it had been fixed magically. As it came free from her shoulders the rips and the bloodstains reappeared.

As he began to unzip the basilisk skin vest she put her hand over his. Dan stopped and then let go. She unzipped the vest slowly. He noticed that she was biting her lip and looked almost afraid. When he saw the bruises and the bite mark, a rage like nothing he had ever felt

consumed him for a moment. He forced the thoughts away and helped his wife finish undressing.

He helped her into one of his shirts along with a pair of her sweat pants. Emma let him lead her to the bed. He helped her get as comfortable as he could. When he turned to leave she grabbed his hand. She motioned to the pillow next to her own and he slid under the covers with her.

Dan held her gently until she fell asleep. His thoughts ranged from killing the people responsible for hurting Emma to wondering with horror about what they might have done to her. He knew that no matter what he would do everything he could to help her through this.

He kissed his sleeping wife gently on the forehead and then went back downstairs to get some answers.

... --- ...

Remus looked over all the women and then sat next to Susan on the arm of her chair. He cleared his throat and asked, "What happened?"

"Don't know. She portkeyed in hurt. Hermione and Diane started healing her. Molly went and got Poppy. I found Alyx and Tonks. They haven't come by to tell us what they found yet," Susan answered in a choked voice.

"Did she say anything?" Jack asked sitting on the floor next to his wife.

"Not a word," Diane said in a hollow voice. Jack pulled her close.

They sat in silence until Dan came down the stairs. He arrived at the bottom step when the door opened and Alyx and Tonks came in. He followed them into the living room and stared at them hard. Alyx cleared her throat.

"How is she?" Alyx asked.

"Asleep. She wouldn't talk to me," Dan answered.

"She probably couldn't. I had to repair her throat. It was almost crushed," Hermione said in a strangled voice. Her father closed his eyes not wanting to imagine how that had happened.

"What did you find?" Harry demanded of the two aurors.

"Draco Malfoy. He was unconscious when we got there. There is no indication that anyone else was with him," Tonks answered in a tight voice.

"I..." Dan started to say but then he had to sit down. He took a deep breath and asked about the bite mark. He was focused on the floor and missed the look of horror that crossed Diane's face.

"She wasn't raped," Hermione told him.

"Are you sure?" Dan asked. It was horrible enough without that on top of everything else.

"Positive," Hermione answered. She had seen the bite mark too.

"He couldn't have. When he was strip searched during processing it was noted that he had taken a reducto curse to his privates sometime in the past year," Alyx said in distaste.

Diane muttered something that only Jack heard before she quickly left the room. They all heard her footsteps pounding up the stairs. She would be there for Emma when she awoke.

Hermione got up to leave the room. She couldn't think. She couldn't breathe. She was four steps from the doorway when Tonks stopped her.

"His trial will be next week. If he lives that long," Tonks qualified the end of her statement. Everyone in the room looked at her.

"He was hurt pretty badly and lost a lot of blood," Alyx told them.

"My heart bleeds for the bastard," Harry snapped.

Hermione closed her eyes and walked out. Harry went after her knowing he was the only one who could possibly comfort her. He found her in the dining room staring out the window at the garden they had fixed.

He wrapped his arms around her from behind and she sighed.

"I should have insisted on a guard but I thought it was over," she told him. He squeezed her a little tighter and she asked, "Will it ever really be over?"

"Yes. One day we will be safe. I promise," he said fiercely.

"I love you, Harry," she said after a few moments of silence.

"I love you too," he whispered.

After a few minutes they rejoined the others. Dan grabbed his daughter in a fierce hug when she came into the room. She just held on knowing that he needed it as much as she did.

... --- ...

Michael Brooks knew that getting lunches for the prisoners was traditionally the newest Auror's job. However Director Shackbolt had recently pointed out that Order of Merlin recipients were excluded from lunch run duty so the second year Auror walked out to the fish and chips stand to pick up a lunch.

The street vendor saw the young Auror walking up and put a new squeeze bottle of vinegar out. In a voice that seemingly didn't fit, the vendor asked, "What can I get you, Gov?"

"One order," replied Brooks, not paying any attention to the man.

"Two quid."

The Auror took a ten-pound note from his pocket and handed it to the vendor, obviously uncomfortable with the muggle money. The vendor handed him the paper bag of hot fried cod and made change

while the Auror doused the batter-fried fish with vinegar from the squeeze bottle.

“Here’s your change, Gov,” said the vendor.

The Auror returned to the Ministry holding cells a few minutes later and placed the bag in the transfer door of the prisoner holding cell. The lone prisoner took the bag and began eating the food hungrily. As he ate his second piece the prisoner collapsed onto the cement floor. He convulsed painfully for a full minute before his blood pressure rose to the point that blood rushed from his eyes, ears, nose and mouth.

The prisoner, Draco Malfoy had ingested almost an ounce of nearly straight Veritaserum. Three drops had enough influence on the brain to cause the person to tell the truth. Ten times that amount would act like a complete Obliviation charm. The hundred times the recommended dosage that Malfoy had ingested was fatal within three minutes.

Malfoy had been dead for almost an hour when the afternoon guard walked by to check on the prisoner. The vendor had been found dead a block away from his stand by the muggle police. They never noticed that the vendor’s cap and apron were missing.

... --- ...

The next issue of Witch Weekly reported the attack.

Female Muggle Attacked by Death Eater

By Reggie McDonald

The endless celebrations for the defeat of the Dark Lord came to a screeching halt today. Emma Granger, muggle mother of the girl-who-lived, was attacked at her place of work yesterday morning. One Death Eater reportedly carried out the attack. Auror Nymphadora Tonks-Lupin, the Auror assigned to the case, did not identify the Death Eater to the press.

Mrs. Granger, a simple woman even by muggle standards, was able to fight off the Death Eater with a special muggle weapon called a scalpel. The press was not given a description of this weapon.

We in the wizarding world should wonder about the Granger family. Mrs. Granger's husband, Daniel Granger managed to use a muggle weapon against a known pureblooded woman, Bellatrix Lestrange. He killed her. Now Mrs. Granger uses another strange muggle weapon on an unknown Death Eater. Just what type of work does Mrs. Granger do that requires her to have a weapon at her disposal?

I am calling for the Ministry of Magic to investigate these muggles. Who knows whom they will maim or kill next?

Harry seethed as he read the article. He tossed the magazine into the fireplace and stormed from the room. Hermione and Diane watched him leave. Jack followed him out the door and Harry grabbed him by the arm.

A second later they were at the apparation point in front of Gringotts. Jack didn't say a word as he and Harry met with Bill Weasley. He smiled when he realized what Harry was doing. It was a grim smile that scared Griphook.

... --- ...

Caroline Derringer checked herself in the mirror as she walked towards the door. She felt herself grinning as she swung the door open. She was delighted that Susan was coming to her flat. The grin left when she saw the look on Susan's face.

"Wha... Susan are you okay?" she asked. Susan pressed her lips together and shook her head. Caroline pulled her through the door and led her to the sofa.

"What's wrong?"

"I have something I need to tell you and I don't know how you are going to take it. I just can't mislead you," Susan said.

Caroline wanted to scream. She knew that Susan was too good to be true. Who ever heard of meeting the perfect woman while working in a London dress shop?

“What is it?” she asked with trepidation. Susan looked around the flat for a few seconds and then took a deep breath.

“Did you hear about the coin bandit attacking that dentist in Crawley?” she asked. Caroline felt her brow rise.

“Yes. Awful business that. Why?”

“The dentist is my Mum. My adopted Mum. I’m not doing this right,” Susan said with a sigh.

“Doing what right?” Caroline asked in confusion.

“The coin bandits. I know them. Well, knew them, I suppose. Draco Malfoy, the one who attacked Emma was a classmate of mine. The other one, Snape, was a professor at my school. He was caught too but it was not reported where you might have seen it. I know why they only stole the coins,” Susan said. She was working on reigning in her thoughts to make them coherent.

“Um, okay. Why?” Caroline asked.

“They didn’t know any better. They were not familiar enough with your world,” Susan said calmly.

“My world?” Caroline asked. Was her perfect woman a nut job who thought she was from another planet?

“The nonmagical world. Malfoy and Snape were wizards. Caroline, I’m a witch,” Susan told her. Caroline didn’t respond right away.

“Riiiiiight. So I suppose you fly on a broomstick?” Caroline asked angrily when she found her voice. If Susan wanted to stop dating she should have just said so.

“Yes. It’s a Nimbus 2001 model. Not quite a Firebolt but I do well on it. Oh, you don’t believe me. Hermione said you probably wouldn’t.”

Caroline watched as Susan pulled a stick out of a holder on her sleeve. She looked around and then pointed it at a book on the table. The book floated up to the ceiling and then back down. When she didn’t respond Susan flicked the stick again and the book turned into a fancy water goblet. Caroline picked it up and examined it.

“I...”

“Yeah I know. There is a whole world that you are unaware of. I could probably get in a lot of trouble for telling you but I can’t lie to you. I’ve never dated a nonmagical person before,” Susan said. Then she snorted and continued, “Before I met Dan and Emma I didn’t really know any nonmagical people.”

Caroline set the goblet down and Susan turned it back into her anatomy book. Susan looked around the flat again and then sighed once more.

“There’s a lot you need to know,” Susan told her. Then she began to talk. She spoke for almost an hour without stopping. When she did Caroline went to the kitchen and retrieved a bottle of wine. She filled a glass for each of them.

“I have a million questions,” Caroline said as she handed Susan her glass.

“Go ahead,” Susan said. She sipped the wine and wrinkled her nose.

“Yeah it’s cheap wine,” Caroline said. She thought for a moment and then posed her first question. Two hours later she knew about the blood war, the boy who lived, Hogwarts, Diagon Alley and the girl who lived. To say she was stunned would be an understatement.

“I know you need some time to think. I understand if you don’t want to date me now. My family is leaving the country for a couple weeks. Emma needs some time on a beach away from here. I’ll be back on 5 August if you want to ring me,” Susan said before she left.

Caroline sat on her couch after Susan left. She picked up her book and examined it. This was not the way she had planned for this afternoon to go. Not at all.

... --- ...

July 21

Emma had never been so glad to start a vacation in her life. She couldn't remember feeling so deeply indebted to anyone's generosity. Harry had directly or indirectly saved each of their lives at least several times.

Hermione had healed the life threatening wounds and the ones that caused her great pain. Healer Pomfrey had been able to heal the rest of her physical wounds within hours after the Auror examination for evidence was finished. By the second morning after the attack, her ribs were mended, and the swelling had disappeared. Her wrist and hand were as good as new. The damage to her psyche would take much longer to repair.

Harry, Hermione, Dan, Emma, Jack, Diane, Bob, Alyx, Susan and Minerva walked into the front door of the villa. Harry had been somewhat surprised when Minerva had accepted his invitation to come along. In reality McGonagall hadn't been on a real holiday in the seven years since Harry had begun at Hogwarts. As such they found themselves at the dinner table together at Harry's spacious villa in Tortola.

Minerva had an unprecedented number of teaching vacancies to fill for the next term – transfiguration, defense, muggle studies, history of magic, divination and potentially potions. Filius was likely to retire in the next few years. More than ever the last year had shown her that she was an exceptional follower and a mediocre leader. The people at the dinner table had saved the school in October and saved the British wizarding world in June. She had been an observer and a participant, never the leader. The people at the table could lead the next generation of witches and wizards. She realized that the most important legacy that she could leave the school with would be to fill

the positions with capable, competent, nurturing instructors. Her challenge would be to sell them on the positions as none of them needed to work another day in their lives.

Dan and now to a much lesser degree Emma wanted their old lives back. When they would get around to talking about it, Dan would realize that their old life no longer existed. In a very real sense they now had three children. He'd always replied, "dentist," when people asked what he did. It was a good part of his self-identity. However, in the last year he'd added "and defender of the light" to the title. Regardless of what he wanted, he recognized that there had been a published price on his head. The fact that the man that had offered it was dead might not keep people from trying anyway.

Dan couldn't ignore the fact that he would do anything to keep his Emma safe and right now that could easily include not living in Crawley or being dentists. Another option would be to take Harry up on his offer of hiring a team of eight bodyguards so that there were always two on duty to escort them around.

In the course of seven minutes Emma had realized that her career in their practice was meaningless. Health, safety, and family were everything. She currently possessed a different set of priorities - wedding planner, wife, mum, mother-in-law and hopefully grandmum. A part of her realized that the last year had been a turning point in their lives and that she'd never felt as useful in her life. She just hadn't had the conversation yet with Dan.

Bob and Alyx found themselves more attracted to each other every day and were grateful that they had both been given the opportunity to escort Mr. Potter and his party back to such a wonderful place. The last year had been exciting and one that they could tell their grandchildren about someday, but the fact remained that they were simple policemen and not billionaires. Under other circumstances they would have had to scrimp and save to be able to afford a week at the guesthouse that he had offered them use of.

Harry had been badly shaken by Malfoy's attack on Emma. Initially he had been worried that she might have sustained permanent injuries. Later he began to worry about whom else might be out there lurking

in the shadows. He had been told that Lucius Malfoy had been killed in the fire, yet his distinctive silver serpent head wand had never been found. He was also concerned over the mysterious death of Draco Malfoy. The examiners at St Mungo's had yet to confirm the cause of death, though he'd been told that the leading candidate was a massive overdose of Veritaserum.

Like Hermione, Harry was in the process of receiving hundreds of offers of employment, requests for public appearances, product endorsements and joint ventures from people that he'd never even heard of. Harry's long-term goals were to use his money to help make the British wizarding world a better place and raise a half dozen bright beautiful adventurous children ensuring the continuation of the Potter line for generations to come. Short term, he wanted to spend as much time as possible inside Hermione and just to relax. It was the part in-between short term and long term that niggled at him. He recalled Aunt Petunia telling anyone who would listen that his father had been an unemployed lay-about.

Hermione had just finished spending the last seven years proving over and over that she was as good as anyone else. Initially it was her individual drive and insecurity. Later it had been fueled by a desire to prove that blood did not equate to ability. If Harry asked her to, she would settle for the life that Molly Weasley had led. Molly was a great mum and Hermione would never argue the point, but a part of her wanted something more. She wanted to put her own scratch on the world. It didn't occur to her that she had already done so.

Susan was anxious to open her ice cream business. She believed that hard work just might ease the aches that she still felt in her heart. She still missed Hannah. Some days her break up with Alyx still made her want to scream and some days it made her want to cry. Caroline was a very nice woman. They had gone on a couple of dates and had a nice time. The conversation with Caroline about witchcraft had gone better than Susan had expected but she had no idea about Caroline's thoughts regarding a long-term relationship.

Jack was happy in his career and happy that his lifelong friends were still in one piece. He had been shaken when he'd heard about the attack on Emma. Somehow he equated the wizarding world with

places far away and had been shocked when it had reached out and touched Emma in her own practice in Crawley.

Diane had learned a lot about herself in the past year. While some of her work in the nonmagical world dealt with victims of violence, the overwhelming majority of it seemed to be endless sessions listening to teens talk about piercings, curfews, problems with boyfriends, and other self-inflicted trivialities. She had felt a lot more meaningful helping comfort victims of war. She had never really settled with the school financially, but wouldn't trade the work that she'd done helping the orphans for anything.

Diane had never been a big risk taker. While Dan and Emma had mortgaged everything to start their practice, she stayed at Crawley Connections because it was a good job and it offered financial security. Some of her work there was satisfying, especially with the battered women and the rape victims that she had helped. It was time for her to branch out and open her own practice. She just needed to talk to Jack about it.

"So now what?" asked Alyx.

Everyone was pensive for a moment and there was silence until Bob replied, "How about a walk along the beach?"

It seemed like a much better alternative to the deep conversations that could wait a few days.

... --- ...

Like Harry, Abraxan was more concerned over the death of Draco Malfoy than she appeared. She was certain of two things and believed another. Malfoy had been murdered and the motive was almost certainly to silence him. Additionally she believed that it was an outside job.

Auror Michael Brooks had produced his Pensieve memory of the event and offered to take Veritaserum to help solve the crime. They had concluded that someone had stunned the street vendor; taken a few hairs to create a polyjuice replica then murdered the kindly man.

The two-week MLE Director transition from John Thomas to Kingsley Shacklebolt was going smoothly and hopefully Kingsley would focus on the investigation as soon as he had taken control of the group.

... --- ...

As Abraxan was worrying over the death of Draco, Minerva had reached her decision. She approached Hermione recognizing that she was the keystone to her plan. Getting her alone for an hour, they took a walk along the beach. As they walked, Minerva began, "Hermione I would like to offer you a full professorship, teaching transfiguration beginning with the next term. I'll strive to accommodate any personal needs that you might have either now or in the future and I would be honored if you would consider my offer." She took another breath trying to get this out as quickly as possible. "Should you accept, I will offer Harry a similar position, teaching defense either full or part time to meet his needs and extend a tenured contract to your parents. I promise to accommodate your future needs whenever you and Harry decide to start a family of your own." She nervously awaited the brilliant witch's response.

Hermione was stunned. It was almost unheard of to be offered a full professorship right out of school. She replied, "Thank you, Professor. I am deeply honored, but would need to talk with Harry before giving an answer. What other positions are open?"

In a more relaxed voice, Minerva replied, "Horace has agreed to stay another year if I ask him. I intend to replace Binns and find a competent replacement for Sybil." She was delighted that Hermione was considering the offer.

Hermione replied, "Perhaps Lavender would be a good choice. I think she is actually qualified in the subject and I don't know that she has other plans."

Minerva walked for a moment and said, "The wizarding world owes you a debt Hermione. I owe you a debt. I am all but certain that you would enjoy the work and another position might not become available for years. Please consider it."

Hermione gave her arm a soft squeeze and replied, "Thank you Professor. We will."

... --- ...

Matilda Emerson read the information one more time before she sat back in her chair. As the publisher of Witch Weekly it was her responsibility to grow the circulation rates of her magazine. What she had just read was disturbing to say the least.

This combined with the numerous howlers she had received about the article on Emma Granger sealed her decision. She called Reggie McDonald into her office.

"Mr. McDonald, when I interviewed you for your position you said that you left the Daily Prophet due to an interest conflict with the new owners. What was this conflict?" she asked.

"Molly Weasley has no idea what she is doing. The paper will fold within three months," he said dismissively. He was positive of the fact.

"I see. Would it interest you to know that we had four hundred subscription cancellations due to your article on Emma Granger? Or that since taking over the daily workings of The Prophet, Molly Weasley has increased their subscription readership by half?" Matilda asked.

Reggie swallowed hard. He knew what was coming next. Emerson surprised him though. She demanded that he write an apology to the Granger's. She wanted it on her desk in two hours.

"Reggie, I understand that you were tortured by the Dark Lord but he's dead now. The personal attacks on Mr. Potter and his family have to stop. I believe that you have it in you to be the person you were before he hurt you."

After he left she looked over the information again. She would have to thank Mr. Bill Weasley for the warning about McDonald. She just

wished that she had known what his editorials had done to the Daily Prophet earlier.

... --- ...

Emma decided that planning a wedding while listening to the sound of the surf was very therapeutic. She and Diane addressed invitations while sipping wine coolers. Diane listened much more than she spoke, but her best friend knew that she was there for her.

While Diane and Emma were visiting, Dan and Jack had driven to the market to buy some beers and wine. Susan and Minerva were visiting the dolphins while Alyx and Bob were exploring the little shops. Harry and Hermione were lying on beach loungers talking.

The faint lightening shaped killing curse scar that was just visible at the bottom of her bikini top fascinated Harry. His was an old scar by the time that he had been made aware of it, but he thought it somewhat ironic that hers was so similar.

Hermione watched him watching her and asked, "Aside from thinking of fifty ways to remove my bikini top, what's on your mind, Harry?"

He grinned, liking how she could read him so easily and replied, "I was wondering where you would like to live?"

She replied, "London is nice, but I was wondering if Professor McGonagall would give us our suite back."

Harry looked at her with a neutral expression on his face. He asked, "What did you have in mind?"

"I'd like to open a primary school for magical children someday. I really need to get some practical teaching experience first. Professor McGonagall is offering us teaching positions at Hogwarts." It was obvious to her that Minerva's offer fit perfectly into her long-term plans of preventing future wars through familiarization between long time magical and firstborns.

Harry had mixed feelings. Hogwarts had been his home. Hermione had supported him through thick and thin. If she wanted to live on the South Pole he would follow her. He just felt like he needed a few months off first.

She added, "Mum and Dad would be offered positions too. You and dad could golf in the evenings, and we could practice making babies. Mum and Dad would be safe. You could teach as much or little as you wanted. We could go to Paris on weekends. Please?"

Attempting to buy a moment to think, he asked, "Have you talked with Dan and Emma yet?"

"No. I wanted to talk with you first."

Harry realized that this was what she wanted to do and replied, "I'm willing to if you want to. When would we need to be back at the castle?"

"I'm not positive. I'll find out. I suspect the week prior to school starting, probably no later than the 24th. Thank you, Harry."

... --- ...

While Hermione was thinking of ways to reward Harry, Bill was writing bank drafts. Harry had decided to divide the million galleon award that he had collected from the Daily Prophet and asked Bill to disburse it evenly among the Order members and the volunteers who had stood with him at Avebury. Bill was happy to comply. The transaction to purchase the financially strapped newspaper had gone quickly. Interestingly enough Bill and Griphook had found that the Malfoy estate had owned a large minority interest in the newspaper. Minister Abraxan had previously decreed the estate to be liquidated and donated the proceeds to the families of Hogsmeade, funding the rebuilding of the village. As such, Bill was able to purchase the newspaper for slightly less than the net value of the business. When Bill was done, each of the volunteers would receive 7,700 galleons.

Per Harry's general instructions Bill had also re-deeded the old site of Fortescue's ice cream shop to Susan Bones and found a magical

builder to do the restoration. The builder would meet with Susan and him when she returned from her vacation to finalize the design of the building. Real estate prices had gone up considerably since Voldemort had been put down, so Bill was fairly certain that she would do well with the property whether she used it, leased it out or resold it.

... --- ...

Minerva was delighted. Hermione and Harry had agreed to accept her offer as full time instructors. Dr. and Dr. Granger had accepted her offer for a team teaching position teaching modern muggle studies as well as writing a new curriculum. Best of all, the four of them had agreed to put together a prototype orientation program to allow the muggleborn first years and their parents a two-day one-night introduction to the castle and the magical world.

After her eye opening dressing down by Katlyn Greystone she had spoken to a number of the muggleborn students. In most cases older muggleborn students had made their transition easier. She also recognized that the pureblood students had issues of their own to address. Minerva hoped to make it easier for all of them.

The conversation at the dinner table the final night before they would leave the island was lively.

Hermione checked her notes and said, "There are thirty-eight students enrolled. We can get portkeys made and deliver them."

Minerva smiled and replied, "There might be as many as forty-four. Since the death of Voldemort, there have been six inquiries from parents who had refused the original offer."

Emma asked, "Do you mean twelve year olds who would be enrolling as first years?"

McGonagall replied, "Precisely. They would be six students who had been denied the opportunity to receive a magical education from their parents who originally considered the magical world to be too dangerous."

Hermione asked, "Do many students with nonmagical parents traditionally refuse their offer letter?" She was thinking of what she had told Diane about being dead had she not attended Hogwarts.

Minerva replied, "Usually no more than one a year. They are given one year to change their minds. If they don't they are obliviated."

A dark look flashed across Harry's eyes for a moment and he said, "The Ministry seems to be very willing to use memory charms as a solution." There was no doubt what he was referring to.

McGonagall didn't feel the need to defend the practice and agreed. After a moment she asked, "Would you have preferred that Mr. Weasley had been sent through the veil or had been given a life sentence living with the dementors? My understanding was that you had to pull quite a few strings to have him memory charmed and allowed to finish his education at a first rate boarding school in Melbourne."

Harry replied, "I did. I just wish that I could have done more."

Dan said, "Harry, he's alive because of you and has his whole life in front of him. Is that so bad?"

"No. I guess not. I just wish that it had never happened." The whole thing continued to hurt him like walking barefoot over sharp rocks

"Now we're back to playing what if. What if the four of you hadn't gone to the wedding?" asked Diane, pointing to Emma, Dan and the Potters.

Susan replied, "I'd be dead. So would everyone who was there that night. Lestrage would still be out there and the dementors would still be hunting people down. Voldemort might have won the war and Ron would be dead. Harry, the best thing that you can do is to let it go."

Harry sighed but nodded, and replied, "You're right."

Minerva asked, "Are you two coming back here for your honeymoon. It's lovely."

Hermione shook her head and said, "We're going to Sydney for a week and a half. We'll be back on the 20th. The first year orientation starts on Monday the 24th. I've found day trips to the Hunter Valley wineries, Bondi beach, Wollongong, the opera house, the blue mountains, and the Great Barrier Reef in Brisbane."

Susan coughed and said something that sounded like, "Room service." They all laughed.

... --- ...

After dinner, they went down to the beach to watch the sunset. The next morning they'd go back to Britain. Emma pulled Harry aside for a minute and said, "Thank you Harry. I'm not one hundred percent better. Diane said it's going to take more time but I really needed a place to feel safe and get better. This was it."

Embarrassed, Harry replied, "There's nothing to feel bad about. You didn't do anything wrong. You're welcome to come here anytime that you want."

Emma shook her head and said, "I wasn't wearing my ring. I could have..."

Harry shook his head and said, "Then he'd be out there murdering other innocent people. You got away and can see Hermione get married in a few days. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. Thanks again for the body armor. It saved my life and saved Hermione's too," she paused for a moment and then said, "I love you."

Harry gave her a hug and said, "See? I'm the lucky one. I love you too."

... --- ...

August 4

Hermione portkeyed to the Dursley home in Indiana with little sound. It was just after dark and there was no one around to see her. She removed the invisibility cloak and folded it over her arm. When she rang the bell Petunia Dursley answered the door.

Petunia's face hardened when she recognized the young witch. She motioned for Hermione to enter and checked to see if the neighbors had seen her.

"What do you want?" Petunia asked Hermione as they entered the house.

"What's she doing here?" Dudley whined seeing the witch.

"Now see here. That freak is not coming here. Not now, not ever," Vernon snapped. He was enjoying his freak free life even if he didn't have someone to blame Dudley's bad behavior on.

"Why would he want to? He owns properties all over the globe and has many friends who would share a room with him if needed. I'm here because I wanted to personally deliver an invitation to Harry's and my wedding," Hermione snarled handing Petunia the envelope containing three first class airline tickets and an invitation.

"Why would you want to marry that freak?" Dudley asked.

"If you ever call him that again you will find out exactly what's involved in the magical art of transfiguration," Hermione said pulling her wand out. She made a soft oinking noise. Dudley squeaked and hid behind his father.

"You can't come here and threaten us," Vernon stuttered. For some reason she scared him much more than the old wizard had.

"It's not a threat you massive tub of dragon dung. Harry wanted to invite you awful people for some reason that escapes me. I'm telling you now that I will not have my wedding ruined by the likes of you

three. If you can't behave in a civilized manner then don't come. Trust me, you won't be missed."

"Awful people? Just what has that boy been saying about us?" Petunia demanded.

"He's finally opening up to me about his childhood. He told me about the cupboard under the stairs, the name calling, allowing Dudley to use him as a punching bag and treating him as your personal slave. God help you Vernon if I find out that you ever hit him. Harry is a very forgiving person. He's willing to put the past behind him. I'm not. You're welcome at our wedding only because Harry is a more decent person than I am. Please RSVP to my mother by 6 August." She turned to leave.

"Wait," said Petunia. "Please? Vernon, take Dudley to the mall for a bit, please." They left and she asked Hermione to come in for a cup of tea. With the two of them gone she asked, "How is he? How are things? I saw his picture in a magazine this week."

Hermione softened her stance a bit and told her about the events from the last year.

After Hermione finished Petunia asked, "He's really gone? He killed my parents, our parents...He killed my sister. I hated everything about the magical world. I took it out..."

"On Harry. He's such a kind man. Someday I hope you can change enough to get to know him. Goodbye Mrs. Dursley."

As Hermione turned to leave, Petunia replied, "We'll be there."

... --- ...

August 5

Caroline stared at her cell phone and attempted to work up the nerve to push the send button. She had replayed Susan's frank explanation in her mind several times in the past couple weeks. Not calling her back wasn't really an option. Caroline just wasn't sure what to say.

She pushed send and put the phone to her ear. She would figure it out. It rang so many times that she almost gave up. Finally a voice answered. A male voice.

"Hello?"

"Er... May I speak to Susan?" she asked. It wasn't possible that she had the wrong number. She had called Susan on the programmed number several times.

"Sure. May I tell her who's calling?"

"Caroline Derringer."

"Ooooooh. It's Caroline. How nice to finally speak to you. Susan is keeping you a secret. I'm Harry," he said in a friendly voice.

"Uh hi," she replied as she heard Susan in the background.

"Give me my phone Harry," Susan demanded. Harry laughed.

"So Caroline, as Susan's almost adopted big bother and soon to be almost brother-in-law I would like to know your intentions," Harry said with a laugh.

"POTTER you prat. Give me my phone before I turn your testicles into bludgers and get my bat," Susan said.

"Heeeeeeeey," Caroline heard another female voice say.

"My intentions? Oh I don't have any except to snog her senseless," Caroline told him. He laughed. She heard a thump and more laughter.

"Bloody prat. And I'm older than you, hippogriff breath. Hello?" Susan said into the phone. Caroline could hear more laughter.

"Hi."

"Hi. Sorry about that. Harry thinks he's funny," Susan said.

"He is. It's the first time my girlfriend's almost brother has asked me my intentions," Caroline replied.

"Girlfriend?" Susan asked.

"If you'll have me," Caroline said.

"Brilliant!" Susan replied.

... --- ...

Hermione looked up from her book as Susan side long apparated Caroline into the living room. Caroline's eyes were huge as she looked around.

"Uh... That was... I don't even know what that was," Caroline said. Emma who was sitting on the other end of the sofa laughed out loud.

"I can relate to that. I'm Emma," she said offering Caroline her hand. Susan reintroduced Hermione and they all sat down.

Before they could speak Diane came tearing into the room like her shoes were on fire with Dan right behind her. She was laughing.

"Bloody hell, Diane how old are you?" Dan asked wiping the water from his head. He picked a piece of Weasley Water Wheeze from his bushy hair.

"Dan! Mind your language," Emma said. He glanced at her and then looked back at Diane.

"Oh come on Danny boy. How many times during university did you throw water balloons at me and Em?"

"That was years ago. Eons," Dan objected.

"I'm not that old," Emma objected, shaking her head at her best friends.

“And these are more of my crazy relatives,” Susan said. She introduced Diane and Dan who both shook her hand.

“We’re not crazy,” Diane said.

“Is that your professional opinion, Dr. Turnbull?” Hermione asked.

“You’re the one who thinks she’s a witch. You tell me,” Diane answered with a smirk. Hermione dried her father off with her wand and shook her head.

“No more chocolate frogs for that one,” she said nodding at Diane.

“I only had one. I can’t help being excited. I love weddings,” Diane said. Emma smiled at her friend.

The phone rang interrupting their conversation. Everyone looked around for the cordless phone and then Susan used her wand to summon it. She looked at the ringing contraption and then to Hermione.

“Green button,” Hermione said with a smile.

“Uh hello?” Susan said. Caroline could tell that she was uncomfortable with it.

“Oh hello Mr. Dursley. Uh... Harry’s not here. Can I take a message? Hmmm... Okay. Yes, I understand. Oh no worries. There will be plenty of normal people there. Hmmm... Got it. The Dorchester Hotel. Separate room for Dudley. Keep my crazy sister away from him. Oh come now. She wouldn’t do that. Well okay, she would but I’m sure she would change him back. I’ll make sure you have a hire car waiting for you. Luxury car? I’m sure they’ll have something that suits you. Have a nice flight,” Susan said. She looked at the phone for a moment and then pushed the red button.

“What exactly would your crazy sister do?” A voice from the door asked. Susan grinned at Harry.

"Transfigure Dudley into a pig," Susan answered. She sat the phone down.

"That would be a waste of her considerable skills. He's already looks like a pig with a wig," Harry said as he sat down next to Hermione. He kissed her very quickly and she smiled.

"Harry!" Emma objected but Harry shook his head still grinning.

"Hagrid tried it once. He only managed to get a tail," Harry said remembering the first time he met his friend. Susan and Hermione both laughed.

"Why would Vernon be concerned about Hermione doing something to Dudley?" Emma asked crossing her arms. Hermione bit her lip and blushed.

"Well uh... I delivered their wedding invitation personally. Vernon wasn't exactly happy to see me," Hermione admitted. Harry laughed loudly.

"Oh, I bet. I can only imagine what he said to you. Please tell me you lost your temper," Harry said.

"Well a little," Hermione confessed.

"Hermione Jane!" Emma snapped. She didn't want to think about what Hermione could have done to the Dursley's.

"I didn't hex them. I promise. I didn't even say anything too awful. I just reminded them about proper manners and if they couldn't manage it then they should stay away. Far far far away," Hermione said blushing deeper.

"I hope they listen. I hate it when you get mad," Harry said slipping his arm around her.

"I wouldn't worry. Petunia seemed to understand and I think she'll keep them in line. Though I'm still unclear why you invited them,"

Hermione said. Harry sighed and she held up her hands in surrender. "I know. No more arguing about it."

"She's my Mum's sister," Harry repeated for what he thought was the hundredth time.

"It would have been nice had she remembered that years ago," Hermione muttered. She changed the subject and said, "So Caroline, Susan's told us nothing about you."

"What do you want to know? I'll answer any question. Maybe even tell you the truth," Caroline joked. She decided that she liked these people.

"Oh good. Permission for an inquisition," Harry said rubbing his hands together. Hermione tapped him on the back of his head and he snickered. Caroline crossed her arms and smiled.

"Caroline Sara Derringer. Major pain in the neck, 040177," she said with a smirk. Dan laughed.

"Name, rank and serial number? We have ways of making you talk. I might feed you one of them frogs and make you as mental as the good Doctor here," Dan told her motioning to Diane.

"I'll explain it to you later," Hermione told Susan who was completely lost.

"Tell us about your family," Harry said with an easy smile.

"I'm the middle of three. All girls. Mum is a seamstress and Dad works at the London stock exchange. He's good at what he does and oh so disappointed that his girls have no interest in stocks and bonds," Caroline said easily.

"You're in medical school?" asked Emma, remembering the day at the dress shop. "Which one?"

"Kings College. I haven't picked a specialty yet. I'm leaning towards vascular," she said anticipating the next question.

“Brilliant. I wanted to go there before I found out about magic,” Hermione said. The two of them began a conversation about medicine that Harry and Susan stopped listening to after a minute.

He grinned at Susan who smiled back. He was extremely glad she was happy.

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August 8 – Wedding Bells

As the tall dark haired boy approached them Petunia felt Dudley tense up. She had to bribe her son to get him to come to the wedding. He didn't want to be anywhere near someone who might give him a pigs tail or an enlarged tongue. She could understand that but she also knew that the real reason he didn't want to come was he would have to behave. After convincing his probation officer that they would return to Indiana she had no intention of letting Dudley not come to the wedding.

Vernon wasn't happy about it either. He was convinced that Harry was somehow responsible for the trouble that Dudley was causing in Richmond. Somehow Petunia didn't believe that Harry had stolen the car that Dudley was found joy riding in. A part of her waited in anticipation to see the man that he'd become.

“Hello, Mrs. Dursley. My name is Neville Longbottom. Please come with me,” the young man said politely.

“Well he's not one,” Vernon muttered. Petunia sighed and looked at the young man.

“How are your parents Neville?” Petunia asked. Neville stopped dead in his tracks, completely shocked.

“Nothing really changes. You know my parents?” he asked.

“We met at Lily's wedding. I was saddened when I heard about what happened to them,” Petunia told him. Neville nodded and then

proceeded to take them to their seats. Vernon sputtered and Petunia gave him a look that she had practiced on Harry for years.

"Why are we not sitting closer to the front?" Vernon demanded. Halfway back was an insult.

"Hermione asked that this is where I seat you. The Weasley's and then several of our Professor's will be in front of you," Neville told him.

"The red heads?" Dudley whimpered.

Neville left Petunia sorting out her son and husband. She was hissing at them in low tones. He grinned at Emma who had watched the whole exchange. She gave him a nod and went to check on her frantic daughter.

Neville and Bill Weasley continued to seat people for a bit and then it was almost time for the ceremony to begin.

A murmur ran through the muggles in the church when they realized that the Queen's grandsons were being led down the isle and seated. Only a few of them were aware that Harry had been knighted.

At the pulpit Reverend Robert Hill watched as the Princes and their escorts were seated, followed by a red headed man that he knew as Mr. Weasley and finally by Mrs. Weasley and Mrs. Granger.

He had known Dan and Emma for years. He knew that this past year had been very hard on the two of them. Just when they were getting back on their feet that awful coin bandit had attacked Emma. Reverend Hill was glad to see that Emma was looking well today.

He watched as the Granger's adopted daughter Susan was led down the isle by an older man named Remus. They arrived at the altar and then each stepped into their places.

A red headed man stepped in to the doorway and walked slowly down the isle. He shook Remus' hand solemnly and handed him a pair of strange looking boots. Remus set them down where he was standing and stepped more to the side.

The process was repeated by the redhead's mirror image. He was carrying a pair of strange looking sports gloves. He gave them to Susan who set them down and stepped aside. Both of the red headed men took a seat behind Molly and Arthur Weasley.

Harry entered from the left and took his place next to Remus. He stared hard at the boots and then the gloves. The trumpets started blaring and he turned to see Hermione and Dan start up the aisle. His mind went blank when he saw her.

She was a beautiful vision in cream and white. Harry thought his heart was going to leap out of his chest. He and Dan shook hands and then Dan gave his daughter's hand to Harry.

Dan kissed Hermione on the cheek and said, "We love you both." Then he took his seat with Emma.

Hermione turned to Harry who managed to smile. She was puzzled for a moment and then looked at the gloves and the boots. Her eyes closed and she swallowed hard.

"Harry and Hermione have something they would like to say before we begin the ceremony," Reverend Hill told congregation.

"Thank you Reverend. I know many of you are questioning the boots and the gloves that Fred and George brought to the altar. The boots belonged to Ron Weasley and the gloves to his amazing sister Ginny. They were very good friends of ours who we lost in the last year. We would..." Harry choked up and Hermione squeezed his hand.

"We would like to think that if they were here that they would be standing up for us. We know that things could have been a lot different if they were here. We didn't want to do this without a little piece of them here," Hermione finished. She saw Fred bury his face in his hands. His date grabbed him in a tight hug. George had his eyes closed and was fighting the tears hard. Molly took little Frances from Fleur who slipped her arm around Bill. Charlie was biting his lip, tears on his cheeks.

Reverend Hill waited a moment for them to collect themselves and then began to speak, "Dear friends we are gathered here today in great joy to..."

Harry and Hermione's eyes locked as they listened to him speak.

"Who gives this man to be wedded to this woman?"

"Molly and Arthur Weasley, in spirit and memory of James and Lily Potter," Arthur said in a strong clear voice.

"Who gives this woman to be wedded to this man?"

"Her mother and I do," Dan answered, sounding a little choked up. Both Harry and Hermione turned to look at him. Dan's face was covered with tears. He bit his lip just like Harry had seen Hermione do so many times before and Harry almost laughed.

"Harry and Hermione have chosen to write their own vows. Harry, you may proceed."

"When we decided to write our vows my first thought was 'Wow, I better get Hermione's help with this'. For the past seven years whenever I needed help, be it with our school lessons or figuring out what life was throwing at me, you were the first person I would turn to. It's been a crazy seven years and without you I would have not survived it. Hermione, you are my best friend. I vow to work as hard as I possibly can to be worthy of your trust in me. I promise to honor, cherish, respect, laugh with, cry with and most of all love you for the rest of my life," Harry told her.

"Hermione, you may proceed," Reverend Hill said softly.

"From Halloween night during first year you have been my friend. Sometimes you have frustrated me and sometimes you make me think that anything is possible. I feel so fortunate that you have chosen to share your love with me, and that I get to grow old next to you. Harry, I promise to honor and cherish you, loving what I know of you, and trusting what I do not yet know. I look forward to growing

together and getting to know the man you will become. I promise to stand with you through whatever life may bring us.”

While Reverend Hill was getting the rings from Remus, Hermione handed Susan her flowers. Susan gave her a brilliant smile.

“The wedding ring is a symbol of the love shared by husband and wife. It is a never-ending circle so that your love and marriage shall be never ending also. Harry please take Hermione’s left hand and repeat after me...”

Harry’s voice shook as he slid the ring on her finger. Hermione’s voice was clear but her hand was shaking. He smiled crookedly at her knowing that they were a matched pair.

“What the Lord has brought together let no man tear asunder. With the power vested in me I now pronounce you husband and wife. Sir Harry, you may kiss your wife.”

‘Wife,’ Harry thought in absolute delight.

They never would figure out who started the catcalls as they kissed. They were just glad that someone broke it up.

The receiving line at the sanctuary entrance seemed to go on forever. Harry, Hermione, Dan, Emma, Molly, Arthur, Susan, Remus and the ushers, Neville and Bill, spoke to each of the guests for a few moments. Hermione hugged all four of the Weasley boys. Charlie teased her about taking hugging lessons from his mum.

Hermione was even polite to the Dursley’s. Harry wasn’t but who could blame him, his cousin was ogling his bride.

... --- ...

Hundreds of miles away in a dark dungeon outside of Bucharest, Rachael Tryveski watched as her palm was slit open. She couldn’t believe her luck. When her father had told her that she was to marry a foreigner she had thought the worst. Expecting a hunchbacked monster, she had been shocked to see her future husband was a

very handsome blond man. He looked familiar but she couldn't place him.

He chanted an incantation over the cauldron that they had just dropped their blood in. When he finished she began her part.

After they both finished he dipped a goblet in the mixture. He fed her the first drink of their marriage, a mixture of their blood and their magic.

She was now bound to him for the rest of her life. It didn't bother her that she had met the man yesterday. It didn't bother her that she was being used to pay off her brother's gambling debt. Anything had to be better than living with her bitter, angry father.

After they consummated their marriage on the floor of the dungeon twice they returned upstairs. Her husband ignored her and left after a quick shower. She sat down with the evening paper and a cup of tea.

This was her new life and she was ready to face it.

... --- ...

The reception was being held at a banquet hall near the church. Emma and Dan visited with friends that they had not seen in quite some time. Everyone agreed that Hermione looked beautiful. The Grangers could not have been happier. Both noticed the tight security but neither of them said anything about it.

Harry and Hermione danced their first dance to a muggle song that Diane had picked. The older nonmagical people in the crowd smiled as they listened to Etta James.

Susan and Caroline danced a couple times but mostly sat and talked with Neville and Luna. Caroline and Luna were amused when they learned that Susan and Neville's mothers had plotted to marry them off when they were babies. Neville grinned at that thought. He had known Susan forever and had never thought of her that way once.

Fred and George took turns dancing with anyone who would dare the floor with them. Harry had ended up dancing with both of them at the same time causing Hermione to laugh. Eventually the Weasley twins pulled her into the dance too. To her surprise they were dead serious when they thanked them for the tribute to Ron and Ginny.

Diane tried everything she could think of to get Jack to dance with her. He and Remus were talking work and golf. Eventually she gave up and pulled Dan to the dance floor with an amused Emma watching.

Dinner was served early and Remus toasted the happy couple before desert. He wished them a long life full of love, surprises and magic.

Poor Frances Weasley had gotten involved in a game of pass the baby. After a short while she got cranky and let out an ear piercing scream. At the same moment she shrieked across the room her mother's hair turned the same color as her father's. Fleur fixed it quickly and managed to join her husband in a laugh.

The father and daughter dance was sweet. Dan told Hermione how proud he was to have such a wonderful daughter. He also let her know that they loved both her and Harry very much. Hermione rested her head on her fathers shoulder and let herself be his little girl again.

To the disappointment of the twins, they didn't smash cake in each other's face. Hermione licked the frosting from his upper lip after they kissed in a way that made Harry flush.

Petunia was keeping a close eye on Dudley. It wasn't difficult. He had been to the buffet table four times. Eventually she found herself speaking with Emma Granger. Mrs. Granger mentioned a magical reception that was to be held the following day. Petunia knew she would never get her husband and son to go but she wanted to. Emma agreed to arrange transportation for her.

Together they watched Harry and Hermione talk softly and kiss in between sentences. Emma was ecstatic at how happy the kids were. She wondered what they were talking about but decided it was better that mum didn't know.

Across the room Harry and Hermione broke apart from yet another kiss caused by ringing glasses.

“How soon can we get out of here?” he asked in a low tone.

“It depends. What do you plan on doing after the party?” she asked coyly.

He leaned close to her ear and told her exactly what he planned on doing with her. They left five minutes later.

... --- ...

The magical reception was held at Hogwarts in the Great Hall.

Emma had allowed Molly Weasley to produce the guest list. The result was a room full of witches and wizards some of whom Harry and Hermione had never met. They spent a good deal of their time talking with DA and Order members while avoiding ministry types that reminded Harry of Slughorn.

Minister Abraxan made a short speech and gave them a blessing on their marriage.

Harry wandered around with his wife greeting their friends. When Lavender teased them about starting on the twin project Hermione surprised him by grinning wickedly and agreeing.

They were talking to Minister Abraxan when Hermione noticed that Petunia was speaking with her mum. She nudged Harry who took a look. He noticed that people seemed to be surrounding them. He shrugged and after a few more minutes they excused themselves and made their way over to them.

People wanted to meet the woman that had taken down Draco Malfoy. Emma was extremely uncomfortable and was looking for a way to escape. To her surprise it was Petunia that came to her rescue.

“Just what do you think you are doing? Mrs. Granger is here to celebrate her daughter’s wedding, not talk about being attacked by a

disgusting little boy whose arrogance was only surpassed by his ego. You should be ashamed of yourselves,” Petunia said in a scathing voice that dripped ice.

“I couldn’t have said it better myself. Hello, Aunt Petunia,” Harry said frowning at the idiots who seemed to get the hint and scurried away.

“Hello Harry. Hermione. I didn’t get a chance to congratulate you yesterday. It was a beautiful ceremony,” Petunia told them. Harry thought she sounded sincere. Hermione linked arms with her mum and they left Harry to talk to his aunt.

“Thank you for inviting us Harry. I know you didn’t have to and if I could be honest with myself I would say that we didn’t deserve an invitation.”

Harry gave her a weak smile and changed the subject. He asked, “What do you think of the castle?”

“It’s scary. I saw a ghost earlier,” she replied. He chuckled.

“There are plenty of ghosts. I can introduce you to Sir Nicholas. He’s a nice bloke,” Harry said but Petunia looked almost terrified. He hurried to assure her, “Nothing and no one here is going to hurt you. Even Peeves the poltergeist is just basically annoying.”

“Poltergeist?” Petunia looked a little feint hearted. Harry gave her an easy smile and then asked her to dance.

Across the room Hermione watched her husband being the man that she fell in love with. She didn’t understand his forgiveness of his Aunt. The more she found out about Harry’s childhood the more she wanted to hex the bat bogies out of all three of the Dursleys. She decided to use his example of forgiveness and just live and let live.

When the dance finished Harry and Petunia made their way over to her. She forced a smile for the woman. Harry wasn’t fooled but Petunia was. Hermione forgot all about her as Harry pulled her on to the dance floor.

Emma found her husband with Susan and Caroline. Together they watched the newlyweds dance.

“So how soon do you think it will be before they make you grandparents?” Susan asked.

“Not too long,” Emma said. She felt the smile on her face widen. She looked around the magical hall and then to her husband. He gave her the special smile that was reserved for only her.

Around the room people were chattering, dancing, drinking, eating and enjoying life.

... --- ...

Aug 10

The next afternoon Harry and Hermione took the portkey from Heathrow to Cairo then Bombay then Bangkok to Sydney. All in all it took nearly an hour and they arrived late in the evening at a very nice hotel.

“One of yours?” asked Hermione giving Harry a playful smile.

“Ours you mean? To be honest, I don’t know. Bill made the arrangements.”

They were shown to their room. The bellman was surprised by the small overnight bag that they had arrived with, given that they had registered to stay ten nights. Usually it seemed like guests brought every item that they owned along with them. He left closing the door behind him. Harry took the traveling trunk out of his pocket and expanded it.

They had lost much of the clumsiness around each other but Hermione was certain that they could practice for years and still find new ways to delight each other. She looked forward to finding out. There is much to talk about on that subject, but now isn’t the time.

The next day they took the guided city tour on the green double-decker busses. Naturally they got off at every stop and saw what there was to see. They went to Chinatown, the powerhouse museum, the harbor museum, kings cross, the opera house, and the harbor bridge. Then they had lunch. After lunch they stopped into Duncan's boomerang school and bought a few boomerangs. Mr. Duncan himself was there. He closed the shop and took them across the street to Queen's park to give them a lesson for an hour, delighted to talk with them.

"You can toss them underhand if you want, but most people toss them overhand like this."

He gave his a toss and amazingly enough it circled around and landed at his feet. "Don't try and catch em. The real ones have a sharpened edge and were used by the Aborigine to hunt with. These are just for fun."

Hermione gave hers a toss and it had made a half circle before it landed.

"That's quite good, Miss."

"Mrs." said Hermione, a bit sharper than she had intended to.

"Oh, no offense meant." Recognition came to him, but he didn't say anything. To him they were just two people enjoying their honeymoon.

... --- ...

Three days later they were tired from constant sightseeing. Harry again brought up wanting to go to Melbourne to see Ron.

"Harry, no. It will eat away at you if you do. You know the rules. He's not to have any contact with the wizarding world."

"That's crappy."

"I agree, but it's not going to make his life any better if someone tells him that he was a wizard, he messed up and got expelled."

"I understand, but I just want to know that he's OK." He paused and said, "No one ever checked up on me."

Suddenly it all became clear to Hermione, and her heart went out to him. She asked, "Where is he?"

Harry replied, "He was enrolled at the Scotch school in Melbourne, but would have finished a week or so ago. A bloke named Chet Winthrop was his caseworker. We could go there and look him up."

Her rational side made one last attempt. "You know that he won't be the same don't you?"

Harry nodded and replied, "I'm not trying to turn him back into a wizard. They took that away from him. I know that. I just..." Words failed him but Hermione understood.

And so they found themselves on Qantas flight OF419 from Sydney to Melbourne. An hour after landing they found Winthrop. He welcomed them into his office. "Good afternoon Mrs. Potter, Sir Harry. How can I help you?"

Hermione spoke, asking, "We were hoping that you could give us an address for Ron?"

The smile never left his face. He told them, "I would love to, but he's in the process of moving. He leased a storefront by Bondi beach to open a sports rental shop. He was going to ring me when he'd settled in. You are welcome to look him up, but he won't be the same person that you knew. Naturally you both know that you are prohibited from revealing anything to him regarding the wizarding world. He couldn't do magic now if you handed him your wand and told him an incantation. That was removed, but he's a happy young man with a bright future. He did remarkably well at Scotch and was quite popular with the young women."

Harry never felt so frustrated in his life. He could win a war, but he couldn't save his buddy's life.

Winthrop thought for a moment and said, "It's obvious that you have his best interest in mind. Let's go find him. I'll introduce you two as friends of mine from...?"

"Crawley," added Hermione.

"OK, Where are you staying?"

"The Quay Grand Suites in Sydney."

"That won't do." He thought for a moment, took out a pencil, pointed his wand at it and said, "Portus." The pencil glowed blue for a moment then the light faded. "Grab hold of this," he said, touching his finger to the center as Harry and Hermione each took an end. He tapped it and a moment later they were outside behind one of the pubs that lined the street behind Bondi beach.

They walked up the street as Hermione resisted the temptation to stop into every shop for a look. Halfway up the road they saw a new shop that was in the process of opening. Outside was a freshly painted sign that read, Ron's Sporting Rentals and Beachwear.

They walked in. Ron looked up, saw Chet and smiled. "G'day Mate. How ya doing?"

Harry was about to reply, then realized that Ron was talking to Chet, who said, "I'm doing fine, Ron. These are two friends of mine from Britain, Harry and Hermione Potter."

Ron held out his hand, smiled and replied, "G'day. I'm Ron Wilson. Pleased to meet you. What brings you here?"

"We're on our honeymoon."

"Congratulations." He gave Harry a wink and said, "She's quite a looker. Well done."

Harry smiled, and replied, "I think so." Hermione poked him in the side.

Chet asked, "How's the setup coming?"

Ron replied, "The stock is ordered. I ordered a dozen long boards and a dozen shorties. The O'Neill gear arrived yesterday. The Billabong and the Shark Attack lines should arrive today."

Just then two young women walked in the shop. Ron spotted them and said, "Excuse me. Ladies, can I be of some assistance?" He exuded charm and gave them an easy smile.

Hermione shook her head for a moment then smiled. She squeezed Harry's hand, who said, "Thanks Chet. We should get going."

He nodded, smiled and said, "Glad I could help. Enjoy your stay."

After Harry and Hermione said goodbye and left, Chet stayed a few minutes to help Ron unpack some boxes. Ron asked, "They seemed like a nice couple. Where do they live?"

Chet replied, "Crawley." There had been no hint of anything in Ron's voice.

Ron nodded and said, "That bloke has the same watch that I do."

Chet nodded and said, "Another man of good taste. You might run into them again. They were going to be here a few more days. I should get going myself. I was just in the area and thought I'd stop by and say hello."

Ron smiled, and said, "Thanks. I really appreciate it."

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Harry and Hermione did stop by later and invited Ron to have dinner with them. They went to the Hard Rock for a pint or two. Ron was almost familiar - his laugh, his smile, and his wit seemed the same, yet he wasn't the man that they'd grown up with.

Harry smiled and asked Ron if he was hungry.

“Starving” said Ron. “I could eat a ‘roo.”

Harry smiled and they ordered large dinners. To no one’s surprise Ron helped Hermione eat hers after he finished his own.

In between bites Harry said, “We just finished school. How about you?”

“Same here. I went to Scotch in Melbourne. It was great. I played football, surfed, chatted up the girls and every now and then my mates and I would go hang-gliding. It was awesome, just floating in the air like a bird.”

Hermione replied, “It sounds like fun. What classes did you take?”

“I took chemistry, botany, computer, business and physics mostly. How about you?”

Hermione replied, “About the same. Harry took some business classes too.”

They talked for a while then went back to Ron’s shop. Harry asked, “Can you really fly with one of the hang-gliders?” Ron had shown him several photos and it looked like a lot of fun.

“Flying really isn’t the right word. You drift mostly and try to find updrafts to get more altitude. I was able to stay up for fifteen minutes once at mount beauty. If the shop does well, I’m going to get a power hang-glider this summer.”

“Sounds like fun,” replied Harry.

Ron nodded and asked, “So honeymooning aside, what brings you here?”

“We had a property to look at, wanted to see Chet, and meet some new friends,” replied Hermione who had the foresight to have thought of something. Harry nodded.

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Too soon it was time to leave. They had spent their last day at the beach. Ron showed them the basics of riding surfboards. Hermione took a few photos. Ron had e-mail and they each promised to stay in touch. They packed their things and took the hire car back to the airport. They made their way back to the wizarding portkey area. An hour later they were back at Grimmauld Place.

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August 23

When Professor Flitwick visited each of the incoming muggleborn students he left them with instructions to meet at Kings Cross station on the twenty-third at seven AM. He was delighted to see that all of the students he had spoken with showed up with at least one of their parents. After showing them how to get to platform nine and three quarters he explained that the train would not be running today.

His description of the portkey ride did not do it justice. They ended at Hogsmeade Station where he introduced them to the Professors Granger. Dan helped a few of the nonmagical people to their feet as Flitwick used a cleaning charm to knock the dust off of them.

A small blond girl glanced at the carriages and asked, "What kind of animal is that?"

"What animal?" her father asked, looking around.

"That is a thestral. Only certain people can see them," Emma replied. The girl looked up at her and then to the beautiful black animal.

"Magical people?" the girl asked.

"No. I'm as nonmagical as you can get and I can see it."

"Oh thestrals. I read about them. We can see them because of Amber," a boy who had to be the girl's brother said.

"We can see them because our sister died?" the girl asked wrinkling her nose.

"You really need to read more, Judy. It's because we were there when she died. You can only see them if you have witnessed death," the boy said.

"Where did you read about thestrals?" Emma asked the boy. He grinned.

"Mum and Dad took us to this amazing bookstore in Diagon Alley," he explained. Emma stifled a grin as she saw Hermione at the age of eleven.

"Just wait until you see the library at Hogwarts. It's astonishing," she told him. She heard her husband chuckle and smiled at him.

Emma explained to the group that the nonmagical parents would not be able to see the castle until they passed through the protective wards. The children were all very excited and chattered as they approached the castle. The adults were stunned when the castle appeared from nowhere.

Dan and Emma led them to the Great Hall where their pureblood classmates were waiting with their parents. Only one of the long tables remained. The prefects, head boy and head girl for the upcoming year were scattered along the table in no particular order. The Professors' table was off the platform and near the student table.

After everyone found a seat Professor McGonagall stood up. She said, "Welcome to Hogwarts. I am Professor McGonagall. This is the first year we have done an orientation seminar for the incoming first year students. The purpose of this seminar for the parents is to address concerns and answer questions. For the students it is to help them adjust to the school so that they may have a successful educational experience. The students that have nonmagical parents typically have some issues adjusting to the magical world. Students who have magical parents have overwhelmingly been schooled at home and need help adjusting to a structured learning environment. First we shall have breakfast and then we can begin our day."

The nonmagical parents and their children gasped in surprise as the food appeared in front of them. Minerva chuckled to herself. She loved doing that.

Harry watched each of the children for a moment as he ate. He wondered how much of who they were to grow up to be was already embedded in them. He remembered the first time he met Draco Malfoy and how he had been reminded of Dudley and his bullying.

Hermione noticed that Wendy Williams, Gryffindor seventh year prefect, was picking at her food. She wondered what was wrong. Wendy usually ate like Ron had. Allie Greystone, the sixth year prefect, was trying to engage her in conversation. After a few minutes Wendy excused herself and left the Great Hall. Hermione slipped out of the room after her. She found Wendy in the bathroom standing in front of the mirror trying to not cry.

"Wendy, what's wrong?" Hermione asked.

"Oh hi Hermione... I mean Professor. Nothing. I'm fine," Wendy lied.

"Come on now. It's just Hermione right now. What's the matter?" Hermione asked again. Wendy looked at her feet.

"Good question. I feel like a heel. I... I just wanted to be Head Girl so badly. My parents were very disappointed in me. What's wrong with me that I didn't get it?" Wendy asked. Hermione almost flinched as she saw her own insecurities.

"Nothing is wrong with you Wendy. I don't know Professor McGonagall's reasons. She didn't ask for my input except for a nomination from Gryffindor. If it makes you feel any better you were my choice," Hermione said. Wendy sighed.

"Thank you. I can't believe that she chose Esmeralda. She's such a..."

Hermione cleared her throat and gave her a special look. Wendy smiled sheepishly. Hermione watched Wendy wash her face and

made a note to have Diane check up on her. Then they walked back to the Great Hall. As Wendy was sitting down she looked at Hermione.

“Do we really have to call you Professor Potter?” she asked. Hermione grinned.

“Yes, you do Miss Williams,” Hermione wrinkled her nose and Allie laughed.

After they finished their meal Professor McGonagall introduced the teaching staff.

“Returning professor’s include Floyd Futhark. He teaches Ancient Runes and is a translation specialist. He is the only person alive that can translate Sanskrit from memory.

Professor Vonda Vector is a Master Arithmancer. She has studied numbers and spell creation for years and created several common number theories that have proven true.

Professor Sheila Sinistra will be teaching Astronomy once again. She discovered many of the alignments that are used in divination and astronomic arithmancy.

Professor Rubeus Hagrid returns as our Care of Magical Creatures instructor. He has been Keeper of the Grounds and Keys at this school for fifty years. He knows more about the animals and beings in the dark forest than any other person alive.” The parents looked at the large man and decided that he wasn’t as intimidating as they had originally assumed.

McGonagall continued, “Filius Flitwick, the head of Ravenclaw House, will be teaching Charms while training his apprentice Lisa Turpin. Miss Turpin scored a perfect NEWT last year. Professor Flitwick is a former world dueling champion. In 1909 he created a small charm called Scourgify, which I dare say is used by every witch or wizard alive today.” The little professor smiled, and the new students each decided that he could teach them many things.

“Rolanda Hooch has returned to teach the first years flying and to referee the Quidditch matches. She is a former professional Quidditch player. In 1963 she scored eighteen goals in one game, a record that still stands today.” The students who had magical parents looked at her in awe understanding the feat while the firstborn children sat quietly.

“Pomona Sprout, the head of Hufflepuff House, will once again return to teach Herbology. She not only knows the proper way to raise magical plants she also knows how they’re used in potions and healing.

Professor Horace Slughorn is the head of Slytherin House. Professor Slughorn invented the hangover relief potion and was designated a potions master in 1938. He makes a point of keeping in touch with his students after they leave school to help them with career decisions.” Slughorn sat up and smoothed his velvet vest at her words.

“Professors Daniel and Emma Granger are the only nonmagical people on the teaching staff. This makes sense since they teach Modern Nonmagical Life which used to be Muggle Studies. This class is in the process of being updated to fit with modern times. Previous to this posting they were medical professionals in the muggle world.” At her words the wizarding parents looked on with renewed interest, wishing that they could attend the class themselves.

McGonagall took a sip of her tea and continued. “We also have four new Professors on the staff this year.

Professor Binns has moved on. Professor Wallace Weldon will now teach the History of Magic. This class is also being updated. Professor Weldon is an expert on historical events. His archeological digs have uncovered many fascinating artifacts.

Divination is going to be taught by Professor Lavender Brown. She is the only student in years to show any true aptitude for the art of divination. Professor Firenze has made peace with the other Centaurs and has returned to the forest.” Many of the younger parents sniggered at her words having endured Trelawney’s incense filled room and bogus predictions themselves.

“Professor Hermione Potter has filled my former position of transfiguration Professor. She is also the new head of Gryffindor House. Her NEWT in transfigurations last year was the highest score in the subject since 1941. Indeed, she almost beat Albus Dumbledore’s score.” The wizarding parents looked at her with respect, not only for her transfiguration abilities, but also knowing that she had earned her place in the Order of Merlin.

“Professor Harry Potter has accepted the Defense against the Dark Arts posting. Professor Potter’s accomplishments against Lord Voldemort are well documented. He is also a wonderful leader and has a talent for inspiring children to do the right thing.” Again, the wizarding people understood the magnitude of his achievements while the nonmagical parents saw a young man who they assumed would be teaching judo or some other type of physical education.

McGonagall let the group take in her words then she continued to speak. The prefects all cheered when McGonagall mentioned that Dr. Diane Turnbull would also be on staff two days a week. For the sake of the magical parents she let an embarrassed Diane explain what kind of Doctor she was.

Then McGonagall opened the floor for specific questions about the classes being offered.

One of the nonmagical parents asked about Harry, Hermione, Lisa and Lavender’s ages. McGonagall nodded having expected the question. She deferred to Slughorn.

“Professor Potter, er Hermione Potter, managed to raise the grades of several of the younger students in my class last year. She found a way to motivate them that had escaped me. I believe that Miss Turpin managed to tutor a great number of last year’s seventh year class to NEWT level certifications in potions. I’m shocked that one of them is not teaching my class,” he boomed startling the woman who asked the question.

“Sir ‘Arry, er Professor Potter, this here one, ‘ad a study group fifth and seventh ‘ears for defense ‘hat saved lives of ‘any kids,” Hagrid said in a voice just as loud.

“You have no idea who they are do you?” one of the magical parents asked. The other parent shook his head.

Dan chuckled and said, “I’m sure the outrageous rumors will reach their ears soon enough. We’ll be talking about the war later. I understand your concerns. In the nonmagical world it takes several years of additional schooling to become a teacher of any sort. We will all be working closely to help the newest Professors to make sure that their teaching skills are adequate. I don’t believe that there is really much need for concern though.”

“I can assure you that all four of them are qualified for their positions. Professor Potter, Harry,” McGonagall sighed and Harry stifled a laugh. She turned her famous glare on him and said, “No. I refuse to allow you to be called Professor Harry and Professor Hermione.”

The older students laughed, as did Dan, Emma and Diane.

“Don’t worry, Professor, it won’t be confusing for long. I am positive that my husband will be the popular Professor Potter while I am going to be reviled as the one who gives too much homework,” Hermione said. The students who knew her all groaned.

“I notice that my cell phone doesn’t get a signal here. How can I keep in touch with Jill and Jason?”

“You may notice that there are no telephones or electricity in the castle as all. We will be demonstrating the Owl Post later this afternoon,” Emma answered.

“No electricity?” One of the muggleborn kids sounded horrified.

“I had that same reaction when I first read about the castle. Some days I really miss my computer. All essays are written by hand on parchment and with a quill. It is quite the adjustment. I can assure

you that by the time Easter comes you will wonder why your parents do not have candles all over the house,” Hermione told her.

“You’re muggleborn?” the girl asked.

“Yes, I am,” Hermione said with a grin.

“The nonmagical Professors are her parents,” Wendy told the student.

“Other than Professor Potter’s defense class are there other physical education classes?”

“We do not have a structured physical education class. Magical children, for the most part, have little need for exercise. Weight issues that plague the nonmagical world are rare. We do have house teams for the wizarding sport of Quidditch,” McGonagall replied.

“No more dodge ball?” one of the muggleborn students asked.

“No more dodge ball,” Harry confirmed.

“BRILLIANT!” One of the students yelled and most of the muggleborn students cheered.

“Dare I ask what dodge ball is?” Slughorn asked.

“It’s a horrible game that nonmagical children are forced to endure,” Hermione answered.

“It’s sanctioned bullying. I can’t count the number of times I broke my glasses during that game,” Wendy Williams said with a shudder. Most of the nonmagical children had the same look on their faces

“Do the different houses represent anything?”

“Hufflepuff students are known for being patient, hard workers, just and loyal,” Sprout said proudly.

“My Slytherins are cunning and ambitious,” Slughorn announced in his booming voice.

“Ravenclaws are known for their wisdom and intelligence,” Flitwick said with a smile.

“Gryffindor students are high spirited and known for their bravery,” McGonagall told them. She smiled widely and continued, “I look forward to seeing Professor Potter attempt to contain them.”

Wendy and Allie both started giggling and then outright laughed.

“I expect to get help from my prefects,” Hermione told them sternly. Both giggled again.

“As did I, Professor. Not to worry. Hi-jinks have their place. I know a Slytherin alum named Zonko. I believe that Professor Sprout left our mischievousness from the Hufflepuff traits and one of the best pranks I have ever seen was pulled by a Ravenclaw student named Devon Flitwick,” McGonagall said. Flitwick smiled at the memory of his son.

“You have it easy Professor Potter. How many Potters, Weasleys or Grangers are in your house this year?” Sprout asked.

“I think we’ve been insulted,” Harry said grinning.

McGonagall coughed something that sounded like Polyjuice and asked for more questions.

“Professor Granger do you plan to teach a section on muggle weapons?” One of the magical parents asked.

Dan and Emma both started to answer and then Dan deferred to his wife. She said, “Contrary to what you might have read in Witch Weekly we are not experts on nonmagical weapons. The so-called weapon I used to defend myself is a medical instrument. It is a knife about the size of...” she watched as Hermione conjured one and levitated it to her. Emma picked it up. She had not held one since she had snapped it off under Draco’s kneecap. Pushing the thought from her mind she continued, “Thank you, Hermione. This is a scalpel.”

“You fought off a Death Eater with that?” Murmurs went around the room.

“Yes. As my wife was saying, we are not weapons experts. The weapon I used to stop Bellatrix Lestrange is called a handgun. It is nearly impossible to get a license for one in the nonmagical world. We have no plans on teaching how to use nonmagical weapons. However, we have spoken to Professor Potter about nonmagical defense methods,” Dan said, seeing how uncomfortable Emma was getting.

“I have spoken to Auror Alyx who has agreed help teach a section in my classes on nonmagical defense. I personally believe that sometimes a wand is the wrong weapon. Sometimes the best defense is to run as fast as you can,” Harry said.

“Harry Potter ran from a fight?” One of the magical parents asked sounding shocked.

“Yes, I have run from a fight. I know when the best defense is to not be there. I plan on teaching your children how to recognize it too,” he answered.

“We understand your curiosity about what happened during the war and will answer your questions about it later. However, the war is over. Voldemort is dead. But there are still dangers out there. One of the biggest is the lack of understanding between the children with magical parents and the ones with nonmagical parents. We are hoping to create an environment where the students can learn from each other as well as in their classes. This is going to be an interesting year.”

Only Hermione heard Harry whisper, “Merlin I hope not.”

End.

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After the dinner, Minerva went back to her office, sat down in her favorite chair and reviewed her notes. Putting her tea cup down she

said, "This is quite an interesting tale, Mr. Crow. It appears that the wizarding world can enjoy a few years of peace. The old scribe nodded wishing that he could have enjoyed a similar game of roulette himself.

McGonagall took another sip and said, "With considerable help from the Chem Prof and Mrs. Vanblundht your tale was quite enjoyable to read. The old scribe nodded knowing that they had made considerable improvements to the story as well as reporting some of the scenes that he hadn't witnessed himself.

They sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes, each lost in their own thoughts. Finally McGonagall spoke the words that were on both of their minds. "It seems Mr. Crow that there is more to talk about. Surely you must recognize the threat that Lucius Malfoy represents, don't you. From what you've mentioned he's reacquired considerable wealth and will certainly strike back at some point in time."

The old scribe nodded. 'It could be weeks, months or years, but the two wizards' paths would eventually cross.' He put his bottle of butterbeer down and took his leave, knowing that he would need to maintain constant vigilance.

He waited to hear from the others.